

The LORD of the RINGS

THE RINGS OF POWER

JULY 2022

EMPIRE

**BATMAN
RETURNS**

TIM BURTON
LOOKS BACK AT
HIS FREAKY
SEQUEL

WORLD
EXCLUSIVE

COVER 1 of 3
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WE'VE BEEN THERE. Now it's time to go back again.

Ever since Amazon announced its grand quest, to bring a *Lord Of The Rings* prequel to our TVs, our brains have been boggling, trying to figure out what a return trip to Middle-earth might involve. With Tolkien's appendices stuffed with swathes of information (Appendix E, Part I: Pronunciation Of Words And Names is a particular banger), but precious little in the way of narrative throughlines, anything seemed possible. Which new heroes will rise? What monsters will be unleashed? Will we see Saruman apply for a building permit for Orthanc?

Now, finally, answers are at hand. For within this issue is a deep dive into the most ambitious series ever made, containing world-first interviews with the key cast of *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power*, and revealing the secrets of the all-new Elves, Dwarves and Harfoots (OG Hobbits, if you were wondering). Our AI Horner also puffed pipeweed with showrunners Patrick McKay and JD Payne, getting the lowdown on their fresh, diverse spin on Middle-earth. It's time to get as excited as a Brandybuck in a cabbage field.

And speaking of going back, we have another doozy of an exclusive: Tim Burton revisiting the idiosyncratic, brilliant *Batman Returns*. The director shares with Features Editor Alex Godfrey the highs and lows of his experience making a sequel that delighted many, but by no means all. And in one of the most fun photoshoots we've done in ages — masterminded by Creative Director Chris Lupton, Photography Director Joanna Moran and photographer Steve Schofield — Burton meets a cat and, yes, some penguins. Frankly, he played the stinkin' camera like a harp from hell.

Enjoy the issue.



Nick De Semlyen

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
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EMPIRE

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO THIS MONTH

TIM BURTON RETURNS TO BATMAN RETURNS



Fire up your rocket-wielding penguins. 30 years after the release of *Batman Returns*, we had a retrospective chat with Tim Burton on that singular superhero sequel — and photographed him, exclusively for Empire. See the results on page 80.

PODCASTING WITH EMMA THOMPSON



Good luck to you, Empire Podcast listeners! The stars of new drama *Good Luck To You*, Leo Grande, Emma Thompson and Daryl McCormack, spoke to Ella Kemp this month. Listen wherever good podcasts are available.

CREATING OUR EXCLUSIVE COP LAND ILLUSTRATION




This month, we look back at James Mangold's classic *Cop Land* as it turns 25, and asked illustrator Tony Stella to create some special celebratory artwork. See the work-in-progress above, and the finished result on page 95.

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job. One. And that was making an insane stop-motion odyssey that took him decades. Good job, Phil.

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A twisted film featuring Batman, Catwoman and The Penguin? It'll never catch on. Except it did, and 30 years on, Tim Burton's deliciously dark Batsequel is considered a classic. He tells us how he did it.

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Spine from issue 402. Newsletter: "Welcome to OSCOPUS Industries Live! Day Festival. Let's have it for Macy Gray!" is from 2002's "Spide-man". Sub: "And you jump up and clap your hands. See! Say!" is from Captain Fantastic



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TAKE 20

THIS MONTH'S FILM MOMENTS THAT MATTER

[EDITED BY BETH WEBB]

No. 1

Stranger Things prepares its endgame

The Duffer Brothers tease the monumental season-capper of their fantasy behemoth

REMEMBER THE LAST time a season of *Stranger Things* ended? When a secret Soviet base exploded, a key character was seemingly vapourised and the enormous Starcourt shopping mall was burnt to embers during a fight with a 50-foot 'Mind Flayer', escaped from the Upside Down? Well, the climax of *Stranger Things: Season 4* is about to make that finale look like a quiet episode of *Countryside*.

"The final episode has more FX shots than the entirety of Season 3," grins Matt Duffer, who created the Netflix phenomenon, about a gang of 1980s kids navigating supernatural horrors, with his twin brother Ross. "There's an hour-long chunk in the final episode that just doesn't stop," adds Ross. "It's the most complicated thing we've ever attempted to do. Episode 8 is all tension and dread, with a run-time that would be long even for a movie. Then — well, everything goes to hell..."

Bad news for the residents of Hawkins, but great news for fans of the acclaimed series, now hurtling towards its fifth and final season. *Stranger Things 4*, made up of nine episodes, has been split into two volumes — the first of which, released in May, veers further into the horror

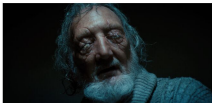


genre than ever before. "Season 3 was a fun, popcorn summer blockbuster. This season is the opposite," says Matt, who explains that the boogeyman sneaking in the shadows of *Stranger Things 4* — an interdimensional serial killer named Vecna — was modelled on the "humanoid movie monsters" that stalked the Duffers' nightmares as kids. "Freddie Krueger, Pennywise, Pinhead... these villains who could speak and didn't look all that different from us kept us



A short-cropped Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) in Season 4.

Right, top to bottom: Older kids Robin (Mays Hawke), Steve (Joe Keery) and Nancy (Natalia Dyer), back in the fray; Max (Sadie Sink) has lit off as a spooked Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), Steve and Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) look on; David Harbour returns as Sheriff Jim Hopper; Robert Englund as masterful psychiatric patient Victor Creel.



Above, left to right: Creators/showrunners Ross and Matt Duffer with Priah Ferguson, Gaten Matarazzo and Caleb McLaughlin on set; The Duffers with Millie Bobby Brown.

awake for weeks."

The season's remaining episodes — each of which required a staggering \$30 million budget, according to a report in *The Wall Street Journal* — increase the intensity even further. "Volume 2 really takes what we did in Volume 1

and ramps everything up," he says. The brothers warn not to await a happy ending. "Usually at the end of a season, we tie things up with a nice bow, before a little tease that says, 'Hold on, something is unravelling,'" adds Matt. "As we move into Season 5, we don't have to do that. There won't be a reset from where we finish this season."

One person who already knows what's in store for our heroes, incredibly, is 1980s pop icon Kate Bush, whose transatlantic hit "Running Up That Hill" features prominently in Volume 1. She watches every scene that her music is featured in, the pair explain, and the track has a "really special spot in the finale", according to Ross. "She's been nothing but cool. We keep going back to her, like, 'Can we use the song here? How about here?' I hope we're not being annoying!"

The Duffers explain that the remaining episodes in Season 4 are stronger for the fact they know where the rest of the show is now headed. When Covid-19 struck, halting production for months, they used the time to write the entirety of Season 5. "It was emotional to write, and super-emotional pitching [what

happens] to Netflix. People I've never seen crying were in tears," says Matt.

As for the rest of *Stranger Things* 4, the Duffers are remaining tight-lipped. What they can reveal is that Volume 2 will push Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) to the brink, having already been subject to schoolyard bullying and losing her powers this season. "For us and most of the writers, because we're all a little on the nerdy side, high school wasn't a good time for us. So we're reflecting that," says Matt. The remaining episodes will also see Max, Dustin and the gang take the fight to Vecna. "One of our favourite things in horror films is seeing our protagonists be proactive," reveals Ross. "You know in *The Lost Boys* when they decide to go after the vampires? It's fun to see people come up with a plan and try to outsmart the villain. That's what Volume 2 is about. But of course, not everything goes to plan..."

To paraphrase Kate Bush, there's a lot more hill to run up yet. **A. HORNER**

STRANGER THINGS: SEASON 4, VOLUME 1 IS ON NETFLIX NOW
VOLUME 2 IS OUT FROM 1 JULY

No. 2

Baltasar Kormákur's survival guide

Here: It's a jungle out there: Dr Nate Samuels (Idris Elba) with his daughter Meredith (Jana Hukley). Below: "Who you calling 'Beast'?"

With **BEAST**, the thrill-seeking director continues to tackle the extreme

AS A MAN who once rode into a river on horseback to save someone's life, Baltasar Kormákur knows a thing or two about facing danger. "It sounds a little macho," the Icelandic filmmaker tells *Empire*, "but I rode out and fetched a girl who had lost control of her horse. It was really dangerous, so I do think I have this instinct in life." That instinct sure comes through in his films' characters, from the band of mountaineers scaling garajunian heights in *Everest*, to a couple stranded out at sea in *Adrift*.

The threat in the director's latest, *Beast*, is a little more on the furry side. The film stars Idris Elba as a recent widower, who must fend off a marauding lion to protect his daughters while on a trip to South Africa. Speaking to *Empire*, Kormákur breaks down how to craft compelling stories about extreme conditions.

HAVE SOMETHING TO FIGHT FOR

The idea of surviving either to save—or to be reunited with—loved ones is something Kormákur has explored extensively through his work. In *Beast*, Elba's character, Dr Nate Samuels, is "doing everything he can to get the

lion away from his daughters," which includes quite literally punching the lion in the face. "The beast is a metaphor for the most difficult thing to overcome," says Kormákur. "But you will fight because you're not going to let your loved ones down."

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

It's safe to say that Kormákur—who has swum with bull sharks and successfully faced down an elephant—knows his animals. In fact, he almost studied to become a vet in Liverpool before his acting career took off. Part of the trick is observation. "If you understand the way that animals think and their instincts, then you can deal with them much better," he says. The filmmaker promises a worthy foe in the lion:

"It's not a monstrous beast, but it's realistic. I want to give you something that you've never seen before when it comes to the intensity and level of attacks."

USE THE ELEMENTS

Kormákur's survival films are defined by their tacticity, with the director taking his crews to the middle of the Pacific and to Everest itself in pursuit of authenticity. The same is true for *Beast*, with the action taking place across South Africa. "You just take what nature gives you," he says. "You go with a location and you work with it, and adjust your material to that." So, let life imitate art and make the best use of your surroundings. Or, one of his more practical tips: "Don't try and turn a horse upwind."

GET OUT THERE

Hailing from the Land Of Fire And Ice, Kormákur partially credits "coming from a country where nature is there all the time" for his fascination with survival. As a result, his advice is simple: if you want to fine-tune your survival instincts, "go out there and get experience." He adds: "There's an existential element we don't show in our regular lives that comes out in those circumstances." Sometimes, you just have to jump in at the deep end. **LUKE WALPOLE**

BEAST IS IN CINEMAS FROM 26 AUGUST



Getty Images

No. 3

IS THIS THE WILDEST
EVER SUPERHERO SHOW?

AS TIME-TRAVELLING DC SERIES
LEGENDS OF TOMORROW COMES TO
AN END, EMPIRE CELEBRATES ITS
WACKIEST STORYLINES



GORILLA VS OBAMA!

Perhaps the most talked-about event in the show's spectrum of daftness, *The Legends* travel back to 1978 to stop a telepathic ape, Gorilla Grodd, from assassinating a young Barack Obama (in order to, in his words, "make America Grodd again").



METAFENSE OF MADNESS!

Going meta before the likes of *WandaVision*, this episode followed the *Legends* as they scattered into parodies of different popular shows, like a New York-set sitcom called *Ultimate Buds*, British period drama *Highcastle Abbey* and sci-fi series *Star Trip*.



SHAKESPEAREAN SUPERHEROES!

The *Legends* run into William Shakespeare while on a mission in the 16th century. Feeling a fresh wave of inspiration, the playwright revamps *Romeo And Juliet* as *'Romeo V. Juliet: Dawn Of Justness'*.



STALIN MEETS SISQO!

The show's fourth season saw 16 nefarious historical figures resurrected from hell and given second chances. Marie Antoinette and Joseph Stalin were among those who faced off against the *Legends* in a battle, scored by a performance of Sisqó's "Thong Song" by the man himself. **BETH WEBB**

LEGENDS OF TOMORROW IS OUT NOW
ON SKY AND NOW



Facing up to a Face/Off sequel

Adam Wingard updates *Empire* on his follow-up to John Woo's 1997 classic, being written with Nicolas Cage in mind

ATTEMPTING A *FACE/OFF* follow-up isn't necessarily a sensible idea. But then, sensible ideas were never part of *Face/Off*'s appeal — a high-concept (Nicolas Cage's psychotic criminal swaps faces with John Travolta's FBI agent!) sci-fi action freakout from John Woo that vibrates on its own insane frequency.

Step in *The Guest* and *Godzilla Vs. Kong* director Adam Wingard, currently scripting a new *Face/Off* with regular collaborator Simon Barrett. Their take is, he says, "an absolute sequel" with Cage at its heart — despite his villainous Castor Troy being fatally harpooned in the first film's finale (albeit while still wearing Travolta's face). "He's just having such a moment. Even before *Pig* came out, we saw this as a Nicolas Cage movie," says Wingard. "That's become totally the obvious way to go now. A couple of years ago, the studio maybe would have wanted a hot, young, up-and-coming actor or something. Now, Nicolas Cage is one of the hottest actors in Hollywood again."

Having long been in thrall to Woo's original ("The *Guest* was very influenced by *Face/Off*, even down to the butterfly knife gag"), Wingard is confident he and Barrett are "the perfect team" for a sequel. "I think we really got it," he says. Getting there hasn't been easy, though. "It has been probably the most challenging script we've ever worked on, for a lot of reasons. There's so much pressure in wanting to make sure that it lives up to the legacy of that project. But every draft you have these things that just click in, and you're like, 'A-ha! That's really what *Face/Off*!'"

Capturing that singular tone is half of the challenge. "You wouldn't think a movie that starts with a character shooting a young child on a merry-go-round was going to be fun," Wingard argues, "but somehow it very quickly goes from depressed, grieving dad to — *wham!* — exciting, fun, character action stuff." With Paramount and producers Neal H. Moritz and Toby Ascher on board, the next draft will be going to Cage himself. "We're really honing in on it," says Wingard. "We're not going to share it until everybody's like, 'This is the one.'" Fingers crossed, Cage will think it's a peach — one he can read for hours. **BEN TRAVIS**

No. 5 The secrets of becoming Al Pacino

In **THE OFFER**, Anthony Ippolito plays the actor who played Michael Corleone. He tells us why it wasn't strictly business, but personal

ANTHONY IPPOLITO WAS at a birthday party when he got the audition call-out to play one of the most legendary actors of all time. "I was immediately very excited but also really intimidated," the actor tells *Empire*. "I went down an Al Pacino wormhole right there at the party, watching footage of him from the '60s and '70s."

Ippolito's iteration of Pacino is introduced in the second episode of *The Offer*, a ten-part miniseries about the tumultuous adaptation of Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather*, told from the perspective of producer Albert S. Ruddy (Miles Teller). "It's unequivocally one of the best films of all time," Ippolito enthuses. "Usually you can't say that, because it's such a subjective medium. But this film is revered by everyone."

Pacino is introduced as the film is about to go into production in 1970, when he was known best as a breakout performer on the Manhattan theatre scene, with only a handful of film roles under his belt. "I think [Paramount head] Bob Evans called him a runt," says Ippolito. "He said, 'A runt will never play Michael Corleone.'"

After landing the part, Ippolito scrupulously studied Pacino's audition video for *The Godfather*, plus his earlier films like *The Panic in Needle Park* and *Scarecrow*, and worked on embodying the actor's early style of performance, which he describes as holding "quiet intensity". Meanwhile, the actor also worked on Pacino's

Above: You can call me Al: Anthony Ippolito channels Pacino's "quiet intensity" — even when delivering prezioses. Right: The real Pacino glowers as Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*.



"nasally" accent and "quirky" mannerisms, and grew out facial hair for some of his later scenes.

Playing Pacino has taught Ippolito about how to peel a performer away from their public persona. "He was just a kid from the Bronx who was passionate about his work," he says. "The process of really digging down into who this person is was illuminating to me." Then, of course, there was the unforgettable experience

of stepping back into 1970s Hollywood, and onto the meticulously recreated sets from the film. "I kept my chair-back," Ippolito admits. "I must've looked creepy, clutching it in my hands on my last day. But it had *The Godfather* font on it, I had to." Some things in life, you just can't refuse. **BETH WEBB**

THE OFFER IS ON PARADESLINE. FROM 22 JUNE



No./6 How a Native-American story defied the odds

Riley Keough and Gina Gammell's *War Pony* has gone from Pine Ridge reservation to the red carpet at Cannes

RILEY KEOUGH WAS waiting to shoot a scene in *American Honey* — Andrea Arnold's 2016 sprawling coming-of-age drama — when she struck up a conversation with supporting actors Franklin Sioux Bob and Bill Reddy. The friendship that followed between the actor and the two young Native-American men was the foundation for *War Pony*, Keough's directorial debut (she co-directs with frequent collaborator Gina Gammell).

The pair had to fight to get the film off the ground. "Two first-time female filmmakers, an all-indigenous cast and no famous people was not a combination that people were throwing money at," Keough tells *Entire*. Yet they weren't deterred from making the film, based on the stories of the people of Pine Ridge reservation, where *American Honey* was partially filmed, and where Sioux Bob and Reddy, who have co-written the film, live. "We actually started the production without all the money raised," Gammell recalls. "Every day, we thought that we might get shut down."

The script for *War Pony* was the result of multiple visits Keough and Gammell made to the reservation over six years, where they spoke to Sioux Bob, Reddy and their community. It follows two boys living on the reservation: 23-year-old hustler Bill (Jojo Baptiste Whiting) and 12-year-old Matho (LaDainian Crazy Thunder), both of whom are trying to make men of themselves. It was a particularly



Above: Young stars Yo-Nami, Long Black Cat, Woodrow Lone Elk, LaDainian Crazy Thunder and Jeremy Corbin Cottle. Left: Jojo Baptiste Whiting and Steven Yellow-Hawk on set.



collaborative process, with Keough using her acting experience to coach their predominantly non-professional cast, encouraging them to connect with her directly while they were shooting. "In the opening scene, Bill's mom is talking to me behind the camera," she recalls. "It definitely helped to get them in the right headspace."

Not only did *War Pony* make it across the finish line, it received its world premiere at Cannes. "It was a celebration, but this has been a really emotional journey for us over the past seven years," says Keough. "I'm so happy for them." It may have been tough and go, but this underdog story has found its happy ending. **BETH WEBB**

WAR PONY DOES NOT YET HAVE A U.S. RELEASE DATE

No./7 Development hell vs Predator

With new *Predator* movie *Prey* out soon, we look at series entries that never got made

TARGET: PIRATES

In Dan Trachtenberg's *Prey*, a Predator will face down a Comanche tribe. But this isn't the first story to pit the alien hunter against primitive weapons. One *Steam Age*-set film pitch, by writers Jim and John Thomas, eventually saw the light as 1996 comic *Predator: 1718*, about a pirate captain who battles Predators in the Bermuda Triangle.

TARGET: DUTCH AGAIN

A young Robert Rodriguez wrote a *Predator 3* script in the early '90s that saw Schwarzenegger return as Major Dutch Schaefer. Vastly ambitious in scale, it began with a Spanish galleon using futuristic weaponry to fend off invisible foes, before moving to an alien moon. "It was just crazy," said Rodriguez in 2004. "It was huge."

TARGET: COLONIAL MARINES

Stop your grinnin' and drop your liner, because Predators were nearly the subject of a USCM bug hunt. After 2010's *Predators*, screenwriter Alex Litvak dreamed up a sequel in which Adrien Brody and Alice Braga's survivors hitch a ride on a Predator ship, and are then rescued by Aliens' Colonial Marines.

TARGET: DUTCH AGAIN (AGAIN)

Another Litvak pitch looked to pull an older, grizzlier Dutch back into the frame. Sprung from prison, a too-old-for-this-shit Schaefer is asked to deal with a crashed Predator ship. Unluckily for him, it's all a trap. Schwarzenegger declined. **JAMES DYER**

PREY IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 8 AUGUST



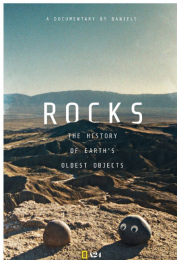
No. 8 Inside 2022's sleeper smash

How eccentric, ideas-packed indie **EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE** proved that original stories can still hit big

YOU'D HAVE TO have been living under a googly-eyed rock not to notice all the praise being lavished on the Michelle Yeoh-starring multiversal action comedy *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Not only has it verse-jumped out of nowhere to become a word-of-mouth box-office hit (making more than \$50 million worldwide since its US debut on 25 March), but it's also earned some big-name fans.

"Skilful, smart, beautifully shot and profoundly moving," said Guillermo del Toro. "An emotional rollercoaster of action, comedy and metaphysical mindfuckery that hits a sugar high for its entire running time," enthused Edgar Wright. "Less is not always more. Sometimes more is more," tweeted *Pachinko* director Kogonada. "See *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. A triumph of the more."

One of the film's most vocal proponents is



Midnight Mass creator Mike Flanagan, who tells *Empire* how he and his wife Kate Siegel checked it out during a day off from shooting his new Netflix show, *The Fall Of The House Of Usher*. "When it ended, we sat in stunned silence," he says. "On the way out of the theatre I turned to Kate and said, 'I think that's one of the best movies I've ever seen.' She practically jumped up and said, 'Right?! Like, EVER, right?!'"

So, beyond the fact it contains funny-packed fight scenes, Jamie Lee Curtis with hot-dog fingers, an existence-threatening bagel and a Randy Newman-voiced raccoon, why has this film connected so widely and deeply



Left: Fun posters created to promote *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, featuring Michelle Yeoh in her many multiverse manifestations.

Below: Cast and crew enjoy the film's opening night party at the South By Southwest Festival in March 2022.

with audiences?

"I think it is able to articulate a feeling we all have on Planet Earth," says Flanagan. "A feeling that things are wrong somehow, that the centre isn't holding. That chaos is winning. That maybe there is no point in this, that our lives aren't what we thought they'd be — but worse than that, might not even matter at all. And it presents its observations about the truth of existence without pretension, without ego, and with a humble empathy and a joyful sense of humour. It is made with — and about — love."

The film's astonishing success is heartening for a number of reasons. Such as the way it allows a 50-something woman to lead a big, kinetic sci-fi movie. "I'm excited that a lot of people are calling this out," says co-director Daniel Scheinert. "They get to go see an action movie that's not about young people." Or the way it handles everyday issues, like the immigrant experience or generational disconnection, in the context of an all-the-way-out-there fun ride. "You find a lot of things you can relate to in it," notes Yeoh. "It's so rich in so many diverse ways."

In a sense, there's so much packed in there, it would be hard for anyone not to find an aspect that appeals to them. "Everyone who goes into it leaves with a different thing that they love," other co-director Daniel Kwan observes. "That's usually a bad sign, like it doesn't all hold together. But I think in some ways, this movie is successfully threading that needle where, hopefully, it has something for everybody."

It hardly hurts that, for most cinemagoers, one watch simply isn't enough. "You can't get everything in the first viewing," says Ke Huy Quan, who plays the fanny-pack-wielding Weymond. "It's only in the second and the third viewing that you go, 'Oh I see, there's this here, there's that there,' and you get to understand more."

Above all else, *Everything Everywhere* represents a clarion call for thrillingly original, blissfully idiosyncratic filmmaking. "I didn't for a single moment feel like this film was trying to serve a marketing analysis or a sales strategy," says Flanagan. "It is not even the tiniest bit cynical, and it was made in an industry that is saturated with cynicism. That it exists at all, much less in this pure, beautiful form, is a miracle."

So many movies are designed to please "a massive built-in audience", as Kwan puts it. But he and Scheinert have done the opposite: with *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, they have built the audience. One which, like that troublesome bagel, will only keep growing.

DAN JOLIN

No. 9

The life aquatic with James Cameron

Avatar: The Way Of Water's new sea creatures revealed

FOR ALL THE genres James Cameron's *Avatar* traversed — sci-fi epic, war flick, Western parable, cross-culture romance, eco-cautionary tale — perhaps the most surprising and delightful was cosmic nature documentary. The natural world of Pandora, from bioluminescent flora to imaginatively but plausibly designed wildlife with cool AF names (banshees, thanators and viperwolves), was enough to fill 17 David Attenborough specials. Happily, in *Avatar: The Way Of Water*, the menagerie is expanding.

Set over ten years after the events of the first film, *The Way Of Water* sees Jake (Sam Worthington) and Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) displaced from the Pandoran rainforests and sent running to the planet's distant atolls. Here they encounter the Metakayina, a clan who reside on Pandora's reefs and live in harmony with manifold sea beasts. Chief amongst them is a huge whale-like creature named a tulkun.

"There are so many sea creatures that people will fall in love with here," says producer Jon Landau. "The idea was to create a creature that was on the scale of Pandora. So a tulkun is, like, 300 feet long. They are a sentient species and as intelligent in their own way as the Na'vi are in theirs."

Also keep 'em peeled for an ilia, a streamlined plesiosaur-like creature, an Easter egg for the new movie that was dropped into the motion-simulator

ride *Flight Of Passage* at the Pandora: World Of *Avatar* theme-park attraction.

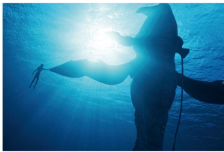
"The ilia is the water equivalent of a direhorse," explains Landau, referring to the animal's nature as a trusty steed. "They are more playful than skimmingwings."

As for the skimming, a marine animal glimpsed in the trailer speeding into battle, it is, according to Landau, "like a giant flying fish but keeps its tail in the water — its tail is its propulsion. The Metakayina and all the reef people use them as their military mounts when they're going into combat. They can go 60 miles per hour for endless periods of time." That sound you can hear? David Attenborough's mind blowing. **IAN FREER**

Above: Jake (Sam Worthington) rides a skimming into combat.

Below: A touching moment with a tulkun.

AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 DECEMBER



Cathy Nagele

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE IS OUT NOW

No./10

"The struggles are where you really learn something about yourself"

[THE Q & A] As **CONSTANCE WU** tackles high-octane action for the first time, the actor explains why she'll never play the same role twice

AFTER HER BREAKOUT role as Jessica Huang in *Fresh Off The Boat*, Constance Wu found Hollywood success via mega-hit romcom *Crazy Rich Asians*, then starred alongside Jennifer Lopez in Lorene Scafaria's acclaimed crime drama *Hustlers*. Whether playing an economics professor in the former or a stripper in the latter, Wu isn't afraid of a challenge, as her latest role confirms. Back on TV for new series *The Terminal List*, she's playing a war reporter who teams up with a Navy SEAL (played by Chris Pratt) to uncover the murky circumstances behind his team's ambush. It's yet another bold about-turn for Wu — but the actor says she wouldn't have it any other way.

How was it venturing into the action/thriller genre?

My goal with any role I choose is always that it's something different from the last role. I mean, my last role was [in] *Hustlers*, playing a stripper and scammer! I hadn't really done the action genre before and it was fun to try something new. A lot of it is similar in that you're trying to focus on character and humanity, but the way things are shot and the set-up of action pieces, that's different. My character doesn't have as much action as Chris' character — he has some really insane, amazing stunts.

What was it like working with him?

Chris and I both had babies around the same time. It was fun to swap parenting stories — I mean, obviously, Chris is not pumping breast milk [laughs], but you know, he really cared about my needs as a parent. The crew also really had a lot of understanding and compassion [for me] coming



back to work for the first time [since] giving birth."

What did you love most about *Hustlers*?

I loved the story. The story approached strippers, not in terms of their bodies, but in terms of their lives, stories,

Top: Newly minted action hero Constance Wu. **Below:** As war journalist Katie Buranek in *The Terminal List*.

needs, desires, dreams and the stakes. And I think that's the way I want people to view women in general, just as people with lives and stories, not just as bodies.

Its portrayal of strong women was so powerful...

I mean, so often I get scripts to play the wife or the girlfriend — it's your profession to help the male protagonist and it's like, "Hmmm, that's interesting" [sarcastically]. But so often women receive judgement about their professions — stay-at-home moms receive judgement, women who are working a lot receive judgement — instead of just understanding that these

are humans trying to move along in life the way anybody is, and they're not perfect.

Are you still in touch with any of the cast and crew?

I just saw Lorene [Scafaria] last week, and I text with J.Lo a lot, Lili [Reinhart] and Keke [Palmer]. I keep in touch with a lot of people from that project. J.Lo was really happy for me when I had a baby, which was really sweet.

How do you feel now, thinking about what *Crazy Rich Asians* achieved?

It was a milestone for Asian-American representation in Hollywood. I think it opened doors and became a springboard for us to see a lot of other great Asian-American stories. I think knowing more about different communities and different types of people is a win for everybody. It does nothing but expand your personal humanity and compassion.

Looking back on your career so far, what do you remember the most?

I've come to love that actually the harder parts of my journey were ultimately the best parts. The struggles, those are the best parts more than the wins. The struggles are where you get to learn something about yourself and apply it and learn something about other people.

What else is coming up?

I'm doing an adaptation of another book, a children's book called *Lyle Lyle Crocodile*, that comes out in the fall. Again, this is very different from *The Terminal List*. I always want to do something different than what I did before. It's fun to try new things. **ELIZABETH AUBREY**

THE TERMINAL LIST IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM JULY

No./11

Why Ncuti Gatwa will be the perfect Doctor

Boyd Hilton on why the *Sex Education* star and returning showrunner Russell T Davies are a perfect duo for *Doctor Who*

IN THE GIDDY whirlwind of the BAFTAs red carpet on the day his role as the new Doctor was revealed, Ncuti Gatwa made an instant impact. Brimming with energy and oozing enthusiasm, Gatwa even wore a cut-out, sci-fi-infused power suit for the occasion. It all felt like a statement of intent. It's difficult to imagine, say, Peter Capaldi going shirtless, and excitedly Instagramming about it all afterwards.

Gatwa is a Doctor for the streaming age. So it's fitting that he achieved instant fame for his role

as brilliantly uncompromising high-schooler Eric in Netflix teen-comedy sensation *Sex Education*. Anyone who's seen him in its three series so far will know he's one of the show's true shining lights. Gatwa imbues Eric with a funny, captivating gitsiness. He takes no shit from anyone.



Of course, the Rwandan-Scottish star is also the first person of colour to be cast as the main Doctor, although many of us hope to see more of the great Jo Martin's Black female 'Fugitive Doctor', having lit up key episodes in the Jodie Whittaker/Chris Chibnall era. But as historic a move as Gatwa's casting is, returning Doctor Who showrunner Russell T Davies explained on that 'New Who' reveal day, 8 May, that Gatwa was actually the last person to audition.

"I thought someone else was a guaranteed hit and then in [Ncuti] came," Davies said. "He simply stole it because he was so brilliant."

And while neither Gatwa himself nor Davies will say anything specific about their new

Doctor until Jodie Whittaker's final episode has aired this October, we do know Davies is going back to run his favourite show at the peak of his career, post-*It's a Sin*, and that his plans for the new Who are "huge".

There is one lucky Whovian who's actually seen something of Gatwa's interpretation of the Doctor: former showrunner Steven Moffat. "Russell showed me the audition tape," he revealed recently. "[Gatwa] is magnificent: all at once a brand-new hero and the same wonderful, mad old Doctor we've always known." Sounds perfect.

[TREND REPORT]

No./12

TRIPPY MUSHROOMS

Spore-bearing soil-dwellers are having a Hollywood moment. Shrooming marvellous

WORDS BETH WEBB
ILLUSTRATIONS BILL MCCONKEY



THE NORTHMAN

Arya Taylor-Joy's seeress whips up a psychedelic fungi broth for her enemies in Robert Eggers' historical epic. Given the feverishly violent events that ensue, the filmmaker may have inadvertently made the world's first Viking anti-drugs advert.



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

Jim Carrey's Dr Robotnik has found himself banished to a mushroom planet. The mad scientist's fungal new home is an Easter Egg for avid Sega fans, who will recognise the looming toadstools from the video-games' Mushroom Hill Zone.



THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD

A few 'throoms turn Jodie's (Pierate) Relief anxiety into a one-woman show, which includes breastfeeding and a cartoon cat's runaway 'starfish'. It's a loud, hyper-intense sequence — maybe she should have stuck to shitkats.

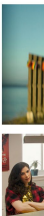
No. 13 The romcom making history

Billy Eichner on *BROS*, the gay romantic comedy that's pushing things forward in more than one way

IN THE WORLD of romantic-comedy films, love is a very heterosexual thing. Love on the LGBTQ+ spectrum is rarely seen in romcoms outside of indie or streaming releases. In the vanishingly rare times it does appear in cinemas, such as in 2018's *Love, Simon* or 2020's *Happiest Season*, the topic is usually the difficulties of coming out, and the parts are often portrayed by straight actors. Now, with *Bros*, Billy Eichner wants to make a studio romcom that portrays gay dating as every bit as joyful and ridiculous as straight dating, but different in many ways too. And he's doing it with an all LGBTQ+ cast.

The project began in 2017, when Eichner was contacted by director Nicholas Stoller, who wanted to make a comedy about a gay couple but didn't want to write a straight man's version of that. Eichner had had small roles in Stoller's *Neighbors* sequel *Sorority Rising* and his comedy series *Friends From College*, and Stoller thought he would be perfect as both co-writer and lead.

Eichner was initially dubious about a studio backing a gay comedy that didn't tiptoe around





Clockwise from top: Luke Macfarlane as Aaron and Billy Eichner as Bobby in *Bros*; Getting acquainted; LGBTQ+ actors were cast in all the roles; Eichner on set.

straight audiences. "This was five years ago, so we weren't even where we are now in terms of queer content," he says. He was keen not to force a gay relationship into the straight-romcom mould, but at the same time, he wanted to make a movie that looked back to classic romcoms and included actual jokes, not just amusing situations.

His character is Bobby, a moderately famous author/LGBTQ+ historian, podcaster who is too busy to think about a boyfriend and doesn't feel the lack of one. "He's surrounded by friends who really prioritise family and who have different kinds of romantic relationships," says Eichner.

"One is a straight couple with two kids, one a gay couple who are in a long-term relationship [who] announce they're in a throuple, and [another is] a gender fluid couple having triplets. He's surrounded by different types of family, and he's very single and theoretically proud of that." Then he meets Aaron (Luke Macfarlane), who is "handsome and charming to an intimidating degree". Aaron is not looking for love either, but he's a fan of Bobby's podcast and the two hit it off.

"As much as I love *When Harry Met Sally*, you can't make *When Harry Met Sally* that just happens to star two men," asserts Eichner. "Because gay dating is not the same... We have our own rules and types of relationship, which can be very quote-unquote 'heteronormative' or they can be very unconventional... It has to be as warm and funny as those classic romantic comedies, but it has to be authentic to the gay experience."

One crucial goal for the comedy was obvious: "It has to be laugh-out-loud funny," Eichner says. "So many films that pass themselves off as comedies these days — and there are exceptions — aren't particularly sharp or clever or hilarious. We're aiming for the standard of those great romcoms like *Broadcast News* and *Moustruck*."

But the key thing for Eichner was that this story be told by the people it's about: not "straight actors trying to win awards". While it is a gay romcom, because the two leads are gay men, the supporting cast includes a range of sexualities and gender identities. "In theory, I have no problem with straight actors playing gay if they're worthy of the role," Eichner says, "but shouldn't gay actors get to play our own characters? Can anybody flesh out an LGBTQ+ character like an LGBTQ+ actor?"

Ultimately, the movie went further, casting LGBTQ+ actors in *all* roles, including the straight ones. "It felt like the right thing to do ethically, and creatively it adds something that's hard to articulate," he says. "To look around and know we're making this historic movie and that all of us are representing the entire community... it was really fucking magical."

Such representation is long-overdue not just in the romcom, but throughout the industry. *Bros* could be the film that finally changes Hollywood — and that's magical indeed. **OLLY RICHARDS**

BROS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 26 OCTOBER

No. 14

"His score was the soul of *Blade Runner*"

[IN MEMORIAM]

Ridley Scott and David Puttnam remember working with late, legendary composer **VANGELIS**

RIDLEY SCOTT DIRECTOR, *BLADE RUNNER*

I remember my editor Terry Rawlings and I had done a very good temporary score for the final cut of *Blade Runner*.

I had engaged with Vangelis to compose the score. Most musicians do not want to hear temp scores, particularly if it is really good, because it inevitably has a dominating influence on their creative process. However, I shoot very much with score tied to the visual and the two are inseparable.

Vangelis had a large, barn-like space north of Marble Arch in London. I would turn up each night having been refining editing during the day, usually to discuss what he thought of the cuts and the temp score.

On this particular evening, he looked exhilarated and said, "I think I've found the sound of your film."

We sat down at his mixing desk, and he pressed the button. On the large, black screen in front of me came up legends and descriptions of replicants and blade runners. The subtext was sound rather than music. Even a ship's bell ran distantly... inexplicably. I never questioned it but simply loved it.

Finally, the subtext of sound became a quiet overture to the explosion and wave of music and sound that washed over me, revealing *Los Angeles 2017*, and I was taken into the future.

Vangelis' score was the heart and soul of *Blade Runner*. He will be missed.

DAVID PUTTNAM PRODUCER, *CHARIOTS OF FIRE*

Vangelis knew [director] Hugh Hudson from their time working in television commercials and so we approached him for *Chariots*. I was really eager that the film didn't become a kind of 1920s Palm Court orchestra piece, and we wanted to make sure people knew it was contemporary. One way of doing that was with the music, so the decision was made to use electronic music as a counter-point to the Gilbert and Sullivan in the film.



There was a record of Vangelis' that I liked a lot, called 'Opera Sauvage'. We cut a lot of the movie to that record. Vangelis was unhappy: he thought he could do much better. His father was a runner and a field athlete and had recently died. Vangelis wanted to do a kind of tribute, a requiem for him. He kept working away at it, and one evening, sat in the back of his car, he put a cassette in and played me the piece of music that everyone now knows as 'Chariots Of Fire'. It was just extraordinary: all the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

But I said to him, "It's too late!" We'd finished the film, it was mixed and done, and we were like, "Oh God! We can't use it!" But we were still making the titles, so we put it over them and of course, it worked. So that's why the main theme, very unusually, doesn't occur anywhere else in the film. Uniquely, when he wrote the theme, he was writing it from memory just off the bits and pieces of film that we'd shown him, not of that sequence. The scene that people immediately think of when they hear that song, running on the beach — he didn't score it to that. He scored it more to the film's themes and overall message. But it worked beautifully.

I think he changed music in film and he was the influence for the arrival of electronic scores in movies. He altered the landscape of film scoring forever — he extended it right out, and you barely hear a score today that isn't in some way influenced by Vangelis. That influence will go on and on. (AS TOLD TO ELIZABETH AUBREY)



Clockwise from top: Vangelis at his home in Harpenden, London, in 1982; *Blade Runner*; A scene from *Chariots Of Fire*.

SMALL
TALK

**BILL
HADER**

Hi, Bill, how are you today?
I'm great, how are you?

Great! What are you watching at the moment?
I actually don't watch a lot of television. Not that it's bad, I'm just more interested in watching really odd movies that for most people would be like getting a root canal. But I find them fascinating.

What are your favourite root-canal movies?

Oh my God, I love old Japanese ones; the famous ones, like *Ugetsu* and *Sansho the Bailiff*. Then I recently watched this British silent film made in the late '20s called *Shooting Star*, which is like a satire of Hollywood. I like Andrzej Wajda movies like *Kanal*. See, root canal! Then I watch a lot of stuff on the Criterion Channel. Do you guys have that in the UK?

We wish we did!

Whatever Netflix is to most people, the Criterion Channel is to me. Last night I found this obscure Japanese crime film called *Take Aim At The Police Van*. And I'll give you one guess what the first scene in that movie is.

We love that this is just a typical Monday night for Bill Hader.

Yes, Monday night is watching *Take Aim At The Police Van*. That first scene, there they are, just taking aim at that police van. **BETH WEBB**

**BARNEY IS OUT NOW ON SKY COMEDY
AND NOW**



No. 15 How Hollywood is smashing sexual taboos

Pleasure is the latest in a wave of films aiming to change perceptions of sex work

THE FILM INDUSTRY'S relationship with sex work is changing. From the ageing porn-star protagonist in Sean Baker's *Red Rocket* to Taylor Paige and Riley Keough's hustling strippers in *Zola*, the highs and lows of sex work are being laid bare like never before. No film is doing this more so than *Pleasure*, a portrait of aspiring porn star Bella Cherry (Sofia Kappel) from Ninja Thyberg. "People were nervous and uncomfortable," the filmmaker says of her initial attempts to get funding for her debut. "[But] they couldn't really say no to it. They understood that I am part of a new generation, with a voice that they needed to give a platform to."

It's a progressive move for Hollywood to show robust, engaging characters working in an industry that rarely enjoys the spotlight on screen. Thyberg sees this as not only a response to the #MeToo movement, but the increasingly prevalent call for the decriminalisation of sex work. "It's really a time of people speaking up against oppression," she says.

While making *Pleasure*, the director discovered her own role in this important conversation. The film does not shy away from explicit depictions of how porn is made and the damaging consequences of exploitative and unsafe shoots. But it also offers a more intimate insight into Bella's personal journey, aspirations and friendships within the industry. "I felt that I wanted to defend sex workers from the people who didn't understand. More and more I realised that I didn't really want to say something



about them but rather say something about us," Thyberg says. "I think that the film is now more of a mirror to society, with its power structures and patriarchy and capitalism. It's not the sex work in itself that is problematic in the film."

Thyberg is aware that opinions won't change overnight, but does hope that *Pleasure* will get people talking. Responses to the film so far have been polarised. "I've had all the reactions from, 'I had no idea that the porn industry was this awful and terrible and exploitative,' to people saying the total opposite," says the filmmaker. "But the most important thing is that we start to talk about it and that we break the taboo. Porn is a huge part of our culture and so we cannot pretend that it's not there." Thanks to *Pleasure* and its peers, the conversation has begun.

CAITLIN GUINLAN

PLEASURE IS IN CINEMAS ON 15 JUNE AND ON MUBI FROM 17 JUNE

Top: Sofia Kappel as Bella (left) with Zeldia Morrison as Joy. Above: Pleasure looks at Bella's journey as a sex worker.

Three Thousand Years Of Longing

Unfiltered, uncensored, uncompromising trailer reactions from team **EMPIRE**

Sophie Hutcher (Social Media Editor): I like that they say the film is from 'The Mad Genius Of George Miller'. They're putting that out there right from the get-go.

Ben Travis (Deputy Online Editor): Yeah, let's not mince any words — George Miller, mad genius, makes sense.

Liz Aubrey (Contributor): As a northerner, Tilda's accent is a highlight. She has form here...

Ben Travis: Yes! She did a northern accent in *Snowpiercer*, where she was basically a northern Maggie Thatcher.

Liz: I love how bright and colourful it is — everything kind of clashes but in a good way.

Ben: Yeah, it's all popping in a weird way. I feel like everything is slightly off-kilter, from the colours to the music to even the slightly plastic-looking CGI.

John Nugent (Reviews Editor): It's very saturated, which I guess *Fury Road* was as well. All the colours are really heightened and stylised.

Ben: If you were going to do a spectrum, it's maybe half-way up from *Fury Road* to *Speed Racer*. I'm also trying to work out what's going on with Idris' little pointy elf ears.

John: They're a bit Channing Tatum's ears from *Jupiter Ascending*.

Ben: Holy shit, yes! Hopefully there'll be some flying moon boots here as well.

Liz: And we also see Tilda and Idris in bathrobes...

John: It seems to be *Aladdin* but horny?

Ben: *Aladdin*, but what if instead of Robin Williams as the genie, you had Idris' Macavity from *Cats*?

Liz: His ears are worryingly reminiscent of *Cats*.

Ben: I just can't go there again.

John: He also has a little beard that seems to change colour too. It's very Beppe di Marco.

Liz: He's also about 12 feet tall in CG-djinn form.

Ben: I'd love it if they actually built, like, a tiny bedroom on set here that he had to crawl into. We can't rule that out with George Miller.

Joanna Moran (Photography Director): It's going to be a romance, isn't it?

John: Romance is a polite way of putting it. I think it's going to be a bonk-fest!

Joanna: George Miller is on the sexy end of things, isn't he?

Ben: There are lots of cannons firing — not the most subtle metaphor!

John: There's all this stuff about desire in so many of the scenes — the word 'longing' is in the title; it can only go in one direction.



Joanna: We're going to find that this whole movie is about repression and unleashing her inner womanliness.

John: That's the vibe I'm getting. It's almost like a companion piece to *Good Luck To You, Len Grande*.

John: At the premiere, apparently there was a streaker on the red carpet, which feels appropriate.

Ben: Was it Idris with little elf ears on?

John: Reports unconfirmed at this stage. **Sophie:** She asks him, "What does one do with three wishes..."

Joanna: Well, you use one of them and ask for more, don't you?

Ben: That always gets you on the shit list. They don't like that.

Liz: He does say ominously, "You'll see..."

Ben: It's got to be some sort of *Monkey's Paw* situation: "You get what you ask for, but not in the way you expected."

Liz: What's Tilda doing with the electric toothbrush?

Sophie: I'm guessing she's trying to clean the pot, but it's a bit weird.

Ben: Who cleans their pottery in the sink with a toothbrush?

Joanna: I also get a lot of *Fear And Loathing* vibes.

John: It's quite surreal, trippy and Bacchanalian.

Ben: It just looks so lavish — you get Baz Luhrmann vibes from it. I don't think there's any one film that looks like all of the things you see in this trailer, let alone whatever the full thing is going to be like.

John: I really like the CGI — it's sort of hyper-stylised.

Ben: It was the same with *Fury Road*.

Sophie: It looks like it goes through different time periods, too.

Liz: I think it's literally set across 3,000 years, or maybe he's been trapped in the bottle for that long?

Sophie: We also see Madge from *Neighbours*.

John: Just out of shot is her husband Harold, playing his trombone. I'm hearing rumours that Toadfish is one of the Bacchanalian extras.

Ben: Carl Kennedy is going to be a walk-on cameo in a post-credits scene.

Liz: After Madge, the trailer does start to properly lose its mind.

John: It does, and I'm all on board for it. Fuck me up, George Miller.

THREE THOUSAND YEARS OF LONGING IS IN CINEMAS FROM 30 SEPTEMBER

BLACK IN FOCUS

AMON WARMANN chews over the main moment in Black film and TV this month



THE WIRE'S INTELLIGENT STORYTELLING STILL STANDS THE TEST OF TIME AFTER 20 YEARS

IT SHOULDN'T HAVE taken me as long as it did to binge *The Wire*, but I can confirm that 20 years after its first hit small screens, its intelligent storytelling, cool dialogue and compelling characters still stand strong. And what's more, it has a wealth of Black talent that knocked it out of the park on an episode-by-episode basis.

A big part of the reason for that is that every character is afforded nuance and complexity. David Simon's drama isn't simply about the bad drug dealers versus the heroic cops trying to bring them down. In the world of *The Wire* — just like in our own — members of law enforcement are just as likely to favour self-interest over justice as criminals are, and vice versa.

The show's writing only bolstered a plethora of memorable performances that kept me and many others coming back for more, even when our favourite characters committed sins. There was Idris Elba's Stringer Bell, a drugs kingpin who took macroeconomics classes to apply his business knowledge to the street; Wendell Pierce's Bunk, who — along with Isiah Whitlock Jr.'s Clay Davis — turned profanity into poetry; and Andre Royo's Bubbles, a heroin addict who was also a police informant. Even a young Michael B. Jordan got to display his star-in-the-making talent as



Criminal masterpiece: Michael K. Williams as stick-up man Omar alongside Robert S. Morgan as Butchie.

Wallace, a teen drug dealer having doubts about the life he's in. It's been 15 years since the character met his end, and his murder still stings.

And then there's Omar Little. The stick-up man with a strict moral code who robs drug

dealers was already a dynamic character on the page. But in the hands of the late, great Michael K. Williams, he's a one-off icon with street-smart wisdom and swagger (Omar whistling "Farmer In The Dell" to announce his arrival never gets old). The fact that he was gay also challenged ideas of Black masculinity. It's the career-defining performance of a great actor.

That Williams, Elba and others are still so closely associated with their characters from *The Wire* is a testament to the show's quality and cultural impact, factors which matter a lot more in the long run than the awards recognition it largely failed to receive when it was on air. There have been many imitators since its fifth and final season concluded in 2008, but no show since has managed to duplicate its depth of Black talent and nuanced material. If you don't know, then don't wait. Get to know.

CLASSIC PICK OF THE MONTH SISTER ACT 2: BACK IN THE HABIT (1993)

Whoopi Goldberg's Sister Mary Clarence instructs Lauren Hill to "wake up and pay attention" if she wants to succeed, while turning an unruly bunch of teens into a sweet-sounding choir.



INTRODUCING...

Madeleine McGraw

THE ACTOR STARTS IN BUZZY NEW BLUMHOUSE SUPERNATURAL THRILLER THE BLACK PHONE

ON HER BLACK PHONE CHARACTER, OWEN

She uses her tough exterior to hide a more soft side. I'm quite a lot like her — my little brother got bullied at school and I stood up for him, just like Owen does in the movie. But I'm definitely not allowed to cuss like her — she uses F-words and C-words like crazy, which my parents would just kill me for saying.

ON HER BUSY SCHEDULE

I was working on a Disney show that conflicted with the schedule of *Black Phone*, so Scott [Dermickson, director] moved the production so that I could do it. I was beyond grateful because I loved Owen so much. I would have been devastated if I couldn't play her. It's such a creepy movie. I didn't get to spend much time with Ethan Hawke on set, but after seeing him in that terrifying mask, I'm honestly kinda glad!

ON HER MCU APPEARANCE

I was in *Ant-Man And The Wasp* as young Hope, Evangeline Lilly's character. When I booked that, I was dying because I practically watch a Marvel movie a day — or at least some scenes from one. I got to meet Paul Rudd, who was really, really funny. I love action movies and definitely want to do more. Me and my twin brother always wrestle, so I sort of know how to do stunts. I'm ready!

AL HORNBER

THE BLACK PHONE IS IN CINEMA FROM 20 JUNE

No./16 What will the MCU look like in 2032?

As Marvel brainstorms its next decade of movies and TV, we predict the future of superheroes

DURING THE MARVEL update at this year's CinemaCon, Kevin Feige announced that he was en route to a creative retreat where the studio's next ten years were being planned out. His whistlestop appearance led to wild speculation: who might we see on the big screen or on Disney+ over the next few years? Here are several likely prospects, some of which have been hinted at or introduced already, and some brand-new...

CLEA A princess of the Dark Dimension in the comics, Clea boasts both powerful magic and troublesome enemies. *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* revealed that Charlize Theron has been cast in the role; Clea turned up at the end of the sequel to invite Strange into the Dark Dimension in order to save a universe. Expect her to play a key part in Doctor Strange's future endeavours.

THE FANTASTIC FOUR A new film for Marvel's first family is in development, and John Krasinski's recent cameo as Reed 'Mr Fantastic' Richards in the *Doctor Strange* sequel might point to the casting (or not; that was another



universe and he was shredded to death by the Scarlet Witch). Certainly Krasinski has been a fan-favourite for the role, along with Emily Blunt as onscreen wife Sue ('The Invisible Girl' Storm) and Zac Efron as her brother Johnny Storm ('The Human Torch).

ADAM WARLOCK Will Poulter will play the super-being in *Guardians of The Galaxy Vol. 3*, but the character's popular enough that Marvel could be considering a Warlock spin-off. In the comics, he's tangled with both Thanos and probable-Phase-Four-Big-Bad Kang, and even by comic-book standards, his deaths tend to be temporary setbacks on the road to greater power.

SQUIRREL GIRL She has the proportionate powers of a squirrel — but has somehow defeated both Thanos and Galactus. Doreen 'Squirrel Girl' Green is self-aware, nerdy as heck and utterly hilarious; a weird superhero enthusiast who has one of the best supporting casts in Marvel comics. She'd be a great team-mate for Kamala 'Ms. Marvel' Khan.

NAMOR If you feel the Avengers are overly chummy, why not introduce a Namor-shaped spanner to the works? Think Aquaman, if Aquaman was a bit of a bastard. The Prince of Atlantis is arrogant, tempestuous and overpowered. Namor would certainly shake up the MCU; the danger is, he might shift the continental plates too.

AMADEUS CHO A Korean-American teenager who had madcap adventures helping superheroes behind the scenes even before he got Hulk powers, Amadeus is mega-likable and surprisingly relatable for a genius. He generally tries to do the right thing even when experiencing unimaginable personal loss — making him a potentially great heir to Mark Ruffalo's Hulk.

FIREBIRD Given powers of flight, gyrokinesis and (possibly) immortality by a radioactive meteorite in the desert, Firebird's a Latinx superhero who struggles with thorny theological questions as well as wanting a place to belong. She could be a fascinating counterpart to Moon Knight philosophically, but also packs a whopping punch for any super-team in need of a hero.

X-MEN They are... inevitable. Long Marvel Comics' crown jewels, the *X-Men* stories offer operatic scale, biting real-world parallels and a ready-made cast of memorable characters. Patrick Stewart's cameo in *Doctor Strange 2* established that, somewhere in the multiverse, mutants exist. But with Stewart north of 80 now and Hugh Jackman apparently done with Wolverine, expect an entirely recast gang of X-people to join the MCU, and new mutants (not those New Mutants) to arise in a few years' time. **HELEN O'HARA**



From outer space to a childhood place

Filmmaker James Gray ditches the spectacle for *Armageddon Time*, his most personal film yet

THE STREETS OF 1980s Queens are a fair few miles from Neptune, the destination of James Gray's last movie *Ad Astra*, or the Amazon from *The Last City of Oz*, his film before that. For *Armageddon Time*, Gray has pivoted to something far more personal and pared-down: a drama inspired by his childhood. "I really wanted to understand what it is that I want to make films," he tells *Empire*. "So I said, 'Okay, forget all the nonsense — focus on making something small and personal. And get the best actors that you can to tell your story.'"

Those actors include *Succession*'s Jeremy Strong and Anne Hathaway playing a version of Gray's harried parents, and an exceptionally twinkly Anthony Hopkins as his grandfather. Gray's onscreen iteration, Paul (Banks Repeta), holds an unshakeable bond with the latter, who also educates him on his Ukrainian descent. "I realised by making this film that you don't have to experience trauma directly to suffer from it," Gray explains. "When Paul's grandfather is telling him about a night in Ukraine where his mother's parents were murdered in front of her...that is in their family's DNA forever."

To fortify the family dynamic on screen, the filmmaker peppered his script with small details from his past, like when he and his grandfather would call each other "my good man". "Tony would improvise a lot of cool stuff



Clockwise from top: Banks Repeta and Anthony Hopkins; Jaylin Webb with Repeta; Jeremy Strong and Anne Hathaway; Director James Gray.

as well," Gray recalls. "Especially with the kid. They called each other Jelly Bean, and he would riff on how jelly beans are really bad for his teeth." The film also spotlights a formative friendship that Paul has with Johnny (Jaylin Webb), a Black student in his class who is systematically mistreated. Then there's the music that shaped Gray's childhood, with the film's title inspired by a cover of Willie Williams' reggae tune 'Armageddon Time' by The Clash. "I was in a state of terror because I didn't think we were going to get the song rights cleared in time," he says. "It features five times in the film."

The Clash and The Sugarhill Gang were in the first draft of the script. "It might have taken Gray travelling to outer space and back again, but he's finally found his own melody, and it sounds a lot like home.

BETH WEBB

ARMAGEDDON TIME DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE



No./18

The champion of the psychological thriller returns

After six years, Park Chan-wook is back doing what he does best with **DECISION TO LEAVE**

FOR AN EMOTIONALLY tense cinematic rollercoaster from a master of the genre, *Decision To Leave* sure has a lot of softshell turtles in it. A stolen love of the creatures make for a surprising comedic presence in the film, which follows Hae-joon (Park Hae-il), a detective who falls for Seo-rae (Tang Wei), a recent widow who becomes a suspect following the death of her husband. "I really value absurd humour," director Park Chan-wook tells *Empire*. "I tend to include moments in life that don't exactly go to plan in my films."

Park is no stranger to complicated romances, from *The Handmaiden* to *Stoker*, but in many ways *Decision To Leave* is a departure from his former films. For one, it keeps violence largely off screen; expect no hammer fights à la *Old Boy* here. Park has also adopted a more classic style over his usually flamboyant visuals. "In the pre-production phase, I was looking at the work of Jean-Pierre Melville and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*," he explains, also citing the *Beck* crime-novel series as an early influence on the films.

Indeed, all the trappings of a police procedural are in *Decision To Leave*, with Hae-joon wrestling with his feelings while

uncovering the circumstances under which Seo-rae's husband fell from a mountain top to his death. Seo-rae was written with Tang Wei in mind — a popular Chinese actor who Park's longstanding co-writer Joeng Seo-kyeong suggested. For Hae-joon, an everyman with honest intentions, he went to his friend, Park Hae-il. "He's very sincere," the filmmaker says of the actor. "He can also be a little quirky and the decisions that he makes may seem a little strange, and I utilised this for his character."

The dynamic of the suspect and detective drives the film, with the ever-elusive Seo-rae keeping Hae-joon constantly on his toes. As with his other work, Park is fascinated in what secrecy can bring to a relationship. "I put a lot of effort into showing something that doesn't tell you everything," he explains. "I call it the economics of an element, where there are a lot of different intentions going on underneath someone's actions."

Not only has *Decision To Leave* re-familiarised director Park with the genre, it's reinvigorated his love of film, which during the pandemic took a momentary hit while he distanced

Clockwise from main: Tang Wei as Seo-rae and Park Hae-il as Hae-joon; Ever get the feeling you're being followed? ... or being watched?; Hae-joon and Seo-rae and team up.



himself from the cinema. "I realised that I couldn't live like that any longer," he recalls. "The experience of going back made me realise that I had taken it for granted. My faith in films had been reaffirmed." It looks like we won't have to wait another six years, then, before diving back into Park's cinematic world. Hopefully the softshell turtles will become a running motif.

BETH WEBB



No./19 NEXT IN THE SERIES

You fell in love with that incredible new TV show. And then it ended! Don't despair — **Boyd Hilton** recommends the sibling shows to watch next

IF YOU LOVED... SHINING GIRLS



MESSIAH

(BBC/PRIME VIDEO)

The creators of *Shining Girls* have been totally upfront about the influence of *Sever* on the look and tone of the series, but it's no exaggeration to say that the film's exquisitely wrought visuals have been a pervasive influence on the entire genre of serial-killer thrillers in the last few decades. And there can be no finer example than this stylish, enjoyably twisted BBC series, adapted by brilliantly named writer Boris Starling from his own books. The show follows a detective (Ken Stott), who investigates grandiose cases, starting with a psychopath inspired by the Apostles to kill 12 people.



HANNIBAL

(PRIME VIDEO)

If you want a TV serial-killer drama that really delves into the perverse extremes of the genre, as *Shining Girls* most certainly does, three seasons of Bryan Fuller's take on the Hannibal Lecter story will surely satiate your appetite. *Hannibal* focuses on the investigations of FBI profiler Will Graham (Hugh Dancy) and his obsession with Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen), while taking time to explore Lecter's cordon bleu cookery. The series somehow aired on NBC in primetime and must be the most spectacularly weird and bloody show in US network TV history.



TOP OF THE LAKE

(SKY STORE/APPLE TV STORE)

The 2013 and 2017 series of Jane Campion's starkly beautiful crime drama are unique in the genre, and Elisabeth Moss' lead character, Robin Griffin, is a TV detective like

no other. Specialising in misogynistic hate crimes, Griffin is a sensitive yet uncompromising cop, who takes no shit from the crass examples of toxic masculinity that she has to deal with on a constant basis. Both seasons are daring and borderline bonkers, but that's what makes them so refreshing.



NARCOS

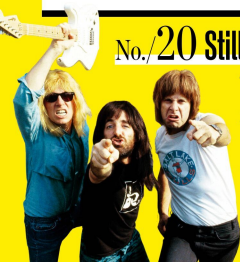
(NETFLIX)

Wagner Moura is the soulful secret weapon in *Shining Girls*, putting in an outstanding performance in the third episode which dives deeper into his character's issues with great power and yet also nuance. It's weird to think, then, that Moura's previous, most famous role by far, was as the notorious Pablo Escobar in *Narcos*. Yet he entirely avoids the clichés of the traditional gangster bad guy, refusing to go crazily over the top (at least in the earlier episodes), instead imbuing him with a sense of calm ruthlessness which seems way more authentic.

SHINING GIRLS IS OUT NOW ON APPLE TV+

No./20 Still turning it up to 11

A brief history of **Spinal Tap**, the fake band that simply refused to quit rocking



1984

Rockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* showcases the talents of David St. Hubbins (Michael McKean), Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) and Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer). Those talents do not include escaping from malfunctioning pods on-stage or keeping drummers alive.

1992

Two-hour television special *The Return Of Spinal Tap* comes out to promote the band's comeback album, *Break Like The Wind*. Unfortunately it receives lukewarm reviews, perhaps because it fails to be preceded by a puppet show.

1994

A LaserDisc of the first movie is released with commentary from the band, in which they accuse *This Is Spinal Tap* director Marty D'Bergi (Rob Reiner) of wearing a false beard, and complain at length about how he stitched them up.

2022

A sequel is announced by Rob Reiner at the Cannes Film Festival, to be released in time for the original's 40th anniversary. Plot details remain sketchy, but one thing's certain: if you're a drummer, you should hide now. **NICK DE SEMYLEN**

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PINT
OF
MILKTIMOTHY
SPALL

When were you most starstruck?

When I worked with Clint Eastwood [on the 1990 film *White Hunter Black Heart*]. I grew up watching *A Fistful Of Dollars* and *Dirty Harry*, and suddenly he's sat right behind me. I remember thinking, "Come on, Spall, concentrate — this is Clint Eastwood!" He was very sweet, and his knowledge of film was astounding. But what amazed me was how shy he was. We went out one night, and he was being pestered by lots of people, and someone said, "Go and help Clint out, he's struggling." It was so funny. I thought, "What am I doing, rescuing Clint Eastwood?"

Do you have a signature dish?

I hadn't really cooked anything apart from egg and chips until last year when I was in Germany making *Spencer*. My wife couldn't be with me because of the Covid restrictions, so she gave me FaceTime cookery lessons. I realised to my self-disgust that I'd never cooked pasta in my life until I was 64 years old! I did it with tomatoes, garlic and frankfurters. How did it taste? You know that Italian trattoria you find all over the world, with a menu outside saying, "Three courses for seven quid"? And when you eat it, it tastes like they haven't really bothered? Well, I tried my very *hardest* and it ended up tasting like that.

Have you ever knowingly broken the law?

I've never murdered anybody or anything like that. The only thing I've ever nicked is a penny chew from Fox's newsmagazines when I was a kid. I still feel guilty about it. Mr Fox, if you're reading: I'm sorry. I owe you a penny chew.

How much is a pint of milk?

That used to be a simple question when it was delivered to the door. Depending on the outlet, I reckon between 55 and 75p? Or you could probably get it reduced for about 40p. It's a movable feast.

What character were you in your first school play?

I played an elderly, humdrum gentleman in a play at primary school. It was called *The Witches' Convention*, and it was written by the headmaster, who I think wanted to be in showbiz. It was a musical. I coughed a lot, because I thought that's what old people did.

Do you have a nickname?

When we were doing *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, the floor managers called me 'Lord Spall' because I was the only one who had any classical training. But that's an old one.

COMING SOON

THE PALE
BLUE EYE

2022

Spall joins Christian Bale and Gillian Anderson in this Gothic 19th-century thriller about a veteran detective who solves murders with the help of a young Edgar Allan Poe.

BOLAN'S SHOES

2022

Inspired by Marc Bolan's T.Rex legacy, and featuring music from the band, this glam rock celebration sees Spall embark on a tumultuous journey from 1970s Liverpool through to the present day.

On a scale of one to ten, how hairy is your arse?

I'm not in the habit of looking at it much, to be honest. I could have a look now... No, I don't want anybody reading this to have that image of my posterior in their mind. I'm performing a public service here.

Do you have a favourite joke?

It's probably a Tommy Cooper one. [*Adopts eerily accurate Tommy Cooper voice*] "Doctor, doctor, I think I'm a dog." "How long have you thought this, Mr Cooper?" "Ever since I was a puppy." Well, it made you laugh anyway.

What movie have you seen most?

It's got to be *Mary Poppins*. Dick Van Dyke: fantastic. You forgive him the accent just for the brilliance of his dance moves. I remember having a rough time on a job once — we were out on location and it was all going wrong — and I came back one night and *Mary Poppins* was on TV. It was like taking an anti-depressant.

What is in your pocket right now?

Let's see what we've got... A sherbet lemon wrapper... Three pounds and thirty pence... And a very nice brass pencil sharpener. My granddaughter needed one when she was drawing, so I found this. It's lovely: embossed, nice weight, beautifully made. There are pencil sharpeners and there are *pencil sharpeners*. And this is a *pencil sharpener*. TOM ELLER

(P. SPALL IN *BRIDGERTON* IS IN CHRISTMAS FROM 15 JULY)



ILLUSTRATION: ARNO

ON SCREEN

10 JUNE -
1 JULY

BIG SCREEN. SMALL SCREEN. YOUR REVIEWS BIBLE STARTS HERE

[EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT]

★★★★★ EXCELLENT ★★★★★ GOOD ★★★★★ OKAY ★★★★★ POOR ★★★★★ AWFUL

[FILM]

THE BLACK PHONE

★★★★★

OUT 24 JUNE / CERT TBC /
102 MINS

DIRECTOR Scott Derrickson

CAST Mason Thames, Madeleine McGraw, Ethan Hawke, Jeremy Davies

PLOT Denver, 1978. Teenager Finney (Thames) and his little sister Gwen (McGraw) live under the threat of violence from their alcoholic father (Davies). When Finney becomes the latest victim of local child-abductor 'The Grabber' (Hawke), he wakes in a stark basement with a disconnected landline phone. One night, it starts ringing...



WHERE DO YOU go when you're lost? If you can, you find a way home. In many ways, this is the path that filmmaker Scott Derrickson has chosen. After exiting Marvel's *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* (possibly via a glowing orange portal) during pre-production, having successfully launched the character on screen in 2016's *Doctor Strange*, the director now finds himself back in, well, *Sinister* territory with this, his horror comeback. There's ultra-dark subject matter. Ethan Hawke in a major role. Regular co-writer C. Robert Cargill back on scripting duties. Jason Blum as producer. Scott Derrickson is home again.

Following his foray into multi-million-dollar blockbuster territory, *The Black Phone* is not so much a step back for the director as it is a film about looking back – at what home really is; at Derrickson's own upbringing; at the forces (and friendships) that forge us into who we are. The ideal prism through which to explore these ideas



Clockwise from main: The mesmerizing Grabber (Ethan Hawke); Gwen (Madeleine McGraw) and Matty (Jordan Heath White); Nice trick! Hanging on the titular terrifying telephone.

is Joe Hill's short story, taken from his 2005 *20th Century Ghosts* collection, resulting in an adaptation whose bleak premise and personal demons coalesce into a surprisingly warm, hopeful, and — yes — scary film.

Derrickson has spoken much about his own childhood in relation to *The Black Phone*, having grown up in a scuzzy '70s Denver neighbourhood suffused with violence. It was a time not just of physical parental discipline and bloody, kid-on-kid backyard beat-ups, but one in which the spectre of Ted Bundy (who committed several murders in Colorado at that time) loomed large. All of these forces swirl around *The Black Phone*'s central figure of Finney, excellently played by Mason Thames in his big-screen debut. He's an almost-teen growing up in scuzzy '70s Denver, where his alcoholic father regularly brandishes his belt as a whipping tool, bullies wait round quiet corners to ambush him, and the local urban legend of child-catcher

'The Grabber' adds an ever-present threat of abduction. Even before he's held captive in The Grabber's basement, Finney lives in the shadow of danger.

Derrickson's film spends a reasonable amount of time in the outside world before trapping its central character in stark, concrete walls — evoking the time and place with a Linklaterian ability to turn memories into movie scenes. '70s rock pounds on the soundtrack (The Edgar Winter Group's 'Free Ride' can't help but evoke *Dazed And Confused*), bottle rockets soar, and kids brag in bathroom stalls about seeing *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. It all feels fondly remembered — but that warmth sits side-by-side with the ever-present threat of physical and emotional torment, and tales of boys vanishing with black balloons left at the scene. Derrickson evokes both the nostalgia and the nastiness with skill, neither one negating the other.

Once *The Grabber* bundles Finney into his black van, the film dials in on its central conceit: that the killer's former victims can speak to the boy from beyond the grave through a disconnected landline attached to the basement wall. It's here that *The Black Phone* plays like the darkest possible iteration of an Amblin movie (yes, darker than *JJ*), as child ghosts call up to help Finney escape a similar fate. Hawke, in a rare villain role (albeit his second this year, post-*Moon Knight*), gives a frightening and fascinating physical performance — since his face is masked for almost the entire movie, it's his presence (sometimes dominant, sometimes playful, always creepy) and vocal work that most impresses. He swaps out the upper and lower portions of his devil-horned mask like some fucked-up psychological exercise — donning frowns that feel more like snarls, or malice-dripping *Man Who Laughs* grins. Sometimes, he exposes his eyes or mouth entirely. Hawke becomes one with those masks, perfectly moulded to his facial contours. It's hard to look away.

The Black Phone's effective jolts and jump-scares should quell summer crowds looking for a straight-up scarefest, but it's the dread that's most palpable — the spectre of waiting for repercussive violence, whether in Finney's attempts to escape The Grabber's basement, or when anticipating his father's wrath. And the salvation from all this is companionship: from the lingering ghosts of fellow kids, or Finney's psychic sister Gwen (Madeleine McGraw, also excellent), who dreams in Super 8 and delivers perhaps the greatest cinematic prayer of 2022: "Jesus: What the fuck?!"

While there are occasional tonal missteps — James Ransone's brief supporting character Max, conducting his own Grabber investigation, feels out of place — *The Black Phone* manages to be a mainstream genre movie that also feels deeply personal and impassioned. It's horror, delivered with considerable heart. Welcome home, Scott. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT Despite its darker-than-dark premise — Abduction! Dead kids! Imprisonment! — *The Black Phone* finds hope in the midst of the horror. Looking for soulful scares this summer? Answer the call.

MARK KERMODE'S FILM MUSIC SHOW IN ASSOCIATION WITH **EMPIRE**

scala
RADIO

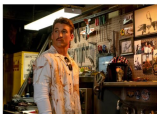
A portrait of Mark Kermode, a man with grey hair and black-rimmed glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie. He is standing with his arms crossed against a bright red background. Stylized white musical notes and sound waves are depicted around him, particularly on the left and right sides.

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He feels the need, the need — oh, you know, Tom Cruise returns as Maverick.



Top to bottom: Recruited with former love Penny (Jennifer Connelly); Payback (Jay Eli); Rooster (Miles Teller).

[FILM]

TOP GUN: MAVERICK



OUT NOW / CERT 12A /
121 MINS

DIRECTOR Joseph Kosinski

CAST Tom Cruise, Miles Teller, Jennifer Connelly, Jon Hamm, Glen Powell

PLOT Test pilot Captain Pete 'Maverick' Mitchell (Cruise) has studiously avoided career advancement in 35 years of flying. Brought back from the wilderness by old rival Admiral Tom 'Iceman' Kazansky (Val Kilmer), he is tasked with teaching a team of elite flyers how to take out a uranium-enrichment plant. One of them, call sign 'Rooster' (Teller), has links to a tragedy in Maverick's past.

affection — with a slight undertow of melancholy — that it's impossible not to get swept up.

Kickstarting with a beat-by-beat recreation of the original's opening sequence — heat hazes, filtered skies, men in overalls, synthetic bells, Kenny Loggins — director Joseph Kosinski (*Tron: Legacy*, Cruise's own *Oblivion*) and screenwriters Ehren Kruger, Eric Warren Singer and Christopher McQuarrie cleave very closely to the *Top Gun* flight plan. There are affecting variations on buzzing the tower, racing jet fighters on a Kawasaki, bar-room sing-songs (giving Mav a bad case of the flashbacks — hello, young Meg Ryan), clothes-light beach sports and a moving death, right down to the love interest played by Jennifer Connelly seemingly living in the same house as Kelly McGillis' Charlie. The tweak here is that Maverick is now the tutor, Obi-Wan to a whole new roster of likeable *Top Gun* Jedi, all with cool call signs like Hangman, Phoenix and Payback (if *Top Gun* were British they'd be called Ballbag and Quavers) and zero respect for the old man.

Kosinski is in his element in the clouds — an early sequence with Maverick trying to break Mach 10 has some of the sleekness of *Tron: Legacy* — forging stunning flying sequences that fuel the blood through countless camera angles and breakneck but comprehensible editing. Early doors, there's a tangible delight in our hero taking down cocky recruits in training exercises, watching big close-ups of actors actually undergoing Zero-G, and learning the new quotable jargon

("Turn and burn, baby"; "Move it or lose it").

Back on terra firma, Maverick obviously butts heads with his superiors (Jon Hamm once again reminding us he is not in enough movies), woos barkeep Penny (a charming Connelly) and, in a nicely judged thread, tries to win over new recruit 'Rooster' (Miles Teller), the son of Maverick's old flying partner 'Goose'. Kosinski mostly eschews Tony Scott's macho posturing and the loveliest scenes involve Maverick and Iceman (Val Kilmer), former rivals finding touching common ground in advanced years. This is perhaps the biggest new thing the film has to offer: an elegiac sense of Maverick as a man verging on obsolete, trying to find his place in an ever-changing world. Kilmer, who has survived throat cancer in recent years, movingly plays most of his screentime via the medium of typing. Cruise, meanwhile, does a terrific job of retaining Maverick's spirit and swagger while keeping it all tasteful and age-appropriate. Thirty-six years on, his conviction still takes your breath away.

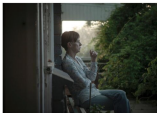
IAN FREER

VERDICT

Avoiding the danger zone of mere retread, Kosinski and co deliver all the *Top Gun* feels and then some: slick visuals, crew camaraderie, thrilling aerial action, a surprising emotional wallop and, in Tom Cruise, a magnetic movie-star performance as comforting as an old leather jacket. Punching the air is mandatory.

IN 1986, TONY SCOTT'S *Top Gun* made superstars of Tom Cruise, F-14 Tomcats and homoerotic beach volleyball. Effortlessly tapping into its '80s-ness, yet somehow still feeling fresh, Joseph Kosinski's joyous *Top Gun: Maverick* not only matches the original but also, in certain areas, is an improvement. It feels familiar, but everyone on board clearly understands the assignment, and it's delivered with so much oomph and

Caleb Landry Jones
as Martin Bryant — aka
Nirram — firmly on a path to
cataclysmic destruction.



Top to bottom: Judy Davis as Mum; Anthony LaPaglia as the equally helpless Dad; A rare smile from Nirram.

[FILM]

NITRAM



OUT 1 JULY / CERT TBC /
112 MINS

DIRECTOR Justin Kurzel
CAST Caleb Landry Jones, Judy Davis, Essie Davis, Anthony LaPaglia

PLOT A dramatisation of the events leading up to the Port Arthur Massacre of April 1996, in which troubled loner Martin Bryant (Landry Jones) opened fire at the popular tourist spot, killing 35 people and wounding 23 more.

THE SHOCKING EVENTS of April 1996, in which a lone gunman opened fire at Tasmania's popular Port Arthur tourist site — the worst massacre in Australia's history — have left an indelible mark on the country and its culture. The immediate aftermath saw the introduction of strict gun laws and, in the years since, the event has been explored through music, plays and podcasts.

Now comes *Nitram*, Australian filmmaker Justin Kurzel's visceral portrait of then-28-year-old gunman Martin Bryant and the events

leading up to that fateful day. There is, of course, an obvious question as to whether we need another one of these soul-searching studies of the motivations behind mass murder, which undeniably give the perpetrator their desired spotlight and pulls focus from the victims. (In fairness to the filmmakers, this new drama never names Bryant, who is called by his supposed school nickname, 'Nitram', and the violence is — rightly — kept firmly off screen.)

And this portrayal of Bryant could hardly be less glamorous; as portrayed by a mesmerising Caleb Landry Jones in a Cannes Best Actor-winning performance, the young man is slow, socially inept and prone to temper tantrums, clearly suffering from undiagnosed mental-health issues that see him shunned as "weird". His father (a gentle Anthony LaPaglia) tries to stay patient, his mother (Judy Davis, outstanding) can barely hide her frustrations. A chance meeting with an older, wealthy woman, Helen (a multi-layered Essie Davis), leads to an unconventional friendship; when Helen dies in a car crash, she leaves Bryant her sprawling home and a life-changing amount of cash. Following the later suicide of his father after a failed real-estate deal, the already tightly wound Bryant begins to make his deadly plans in a sadly familiar montage of gun-purchasing, target-practice, and the playing of old records at super-slow speed.

While *Nitram* may follow in the well-worn footsteps of other mass-murder movies,

attempting to plot a logical path from difficult psychology to extreme act, there's no denying the level of skill on display in both the exceptional performances and stunning craft. Working again from a screenplay by his *Snowtown* and *True History Of The Kelly Gang* writer Sean Grant, Kurzel (who seems drawn to tales of violent misfits) manages to avoid being overly sympathetic to Bryant, while highlighting the failures of care and law that ultimately enabled him to live out his darkest fantasies.

The film reaches its inevitable fever pitch when Bryant fulfils what he regards as his true potential; on-screen text then grimly informs us that firearm ownership levels in Australia have never been higher. Yet it's difficult to know exactly who the film is for. It could certainly be read as a sensitive memorial, or a potent warning that this could so easily happen again. But there's also an uneasy sense that it is playing into the infamy-hungry hands of the real-life Bryant who — currently serving 35 life sentences with no chance of parole — would surely approve of being back at the centre of the frame. **NIGEL BAUGHMAN**

VERDICT Exceptional performances, particularly from Caleb Landry Jones in the lead, and a sensitive touch from director Justin Kurzel can't shake the unease of giving yet another cinematic spotlight to a real-life mass murderer.

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Distinctly fewer sequins in this *Cha Cha* than we get on *Strictly*.

[FILM]

CHA CHA REAL SMOOTH



OUT 17 JUNE (APPLE TV+)
CERT TBC / 107 MINS

DIRECTOR Cooper Raiff

CAST Cooper Raiff, Dakota Johnson, Leslie Mann, Brad Garrett, Raúl Castillo, Vanessa Burghardt

PLOT Andrew (Raiff) has returned home after graduating from college. In a bid to find purpose, he takes up a regular job at Bar Mitzvahs, through which he sparks a friendship with Domino (Johnson) and her autistic daughter Lola (Burghardt).

YOU DON'T HAVE to be familiar with America's Bar Mitzvah party industry to know the moves to its dancefloor staple 'Cha Cha Slide'. You slide to the left, then the right, do a criss-cross with your feet, and the rest goes from there. The same can be said for the film that references that song's lyrics, *Cha Cha Real Smooth*. Cooper Raiff's Sundance-winning sophomore indie, which he also wrote and stars in, *Bar* and *Bar Mitzvahs* frequently provide the film's stage — think kippahs, cake, and throngs of awkward 12-year-

olds shuffling along to trap music — but at its heart, the film is a character study of an aimless yet affable young man coasting, *The Graduate*-style, through post-academic life.

The film in many ways shares connective tissue with Raiff's debut film *Freshman Year* (titled *Shithouse* in the US), a sometimes bracingly honest account of shy student Alex (played by Raiff) navigating clumsily through the social requirements of college life. Like Alex, Raiff's character here, Andrew, always articulates his feelings astutely, which contributes to some of the film's more tender moments — particularly between Dakota Johnson's character Domino; her teenage daughter Lola (Vanessa Burghardt), who has been held back in school on account of her autism; and Andrew's bipolar mother, played with seasoned maternal warmth by Leslie Mann.

Domino and Andrew connect via a series of long glances over the cloth-covered tables at the Bar Mitzvah of one of Lola's classmates (Andrew has tagged along with his kid brother). Her relative youth and ability to wear clothes very well have branded Domino an outcast among the other mothers of the community, but her bond with Lola and need to give her as conventional an adolescence as possible drives her to these functions regularly. Andrew's ability to win over Lola, whose autism manifests in a need for strict rules and boundaries, hails the start of a complicated but well-meaning

relationship with both.

Johnson — a consistently enigmatic and beguiling screen presence — collaborated with Raiff on her character, who suffers from depressive feelings, only drawing Andrew further into her orbit. As a result, her dialogue feels more nuanced and lived-in, as a woman a decade older than Andrew's 22-year-old. Raiff, who is 25, imbues the surrounding script with unbridled earnestness. Each of his characters are sympathetic and redeemable, even when they make poor decisions. It's a quality that at times overpowers the film; though rooted in a suburban community consisting of people with real-life issues, Raiff's palpable love for the characters that he's created romanticises them to the point where they feel at odds with the world that he's created for them.

Yet this is still an impressively observant film, and its devout lack of cynicism renders *Cha Cha Real Smooth* a tonic, brimming with messy, backable characters and ending on an affectionate and hopeful note. Cynics may bristle at Raiff's optimistic intentions, but this is a film named after a hopelessly cheesy dance song's lyrics, after all. **BETH WEBB**

VERDICT

Raiff's assured and intelligent writing and direction, paired with the strength of its acting ensemble, make this an irresistibly charming, emotionally rich treat.



EVERYTHING WENT FINE

★★★★

OUT 17 JUNE / CERT 15 / 110 MINS

DIRECTOR François Ozon

CAST Sophie Marceau, André Dussollier, Geraldine Pailhas

Everything Went Fine may be French director François Ozon's most understated film yet: a calm, considered, ground-level account of assisted dying. When André (André Dussollier) has a stroke and requires round-the-clock care, he asks his daughter (a stoic Sophie Marceau) to help him end it all. They have a complicated relationship even before the question of euthanasia, but Ozon fills it all with a clear-minded focus, leaving the performances to sing. The inevitable conclusion is played out simply and straightforwardly, as that title suggests, the film is unsentimental, but still deeply affecting. "No crybabies", André repeats throughout the film — good luck to any viewer following that instruction by the end. **AM**



BRIAN AND CHARLES

★★★★

OUT 8 JULY / CERT TBC / 90 MINS

DIRECTOR Jim Archer

CAST David Earl, Chris Hayward, Louise Brealey

The heavy-besppected comedy character Brian Gittins (David Earl) gets his big-screen moment in the sun in this immediately likeable comic mockumentary fable. An eccentric loner, Brian lives in a remote Welsh village inventing useless tat — a pine-cone bag, an egg belt. Then he decides to make a new friend: Charles Petrescu (Chris Hayward), a robot built from an old washing machine. With hilariously deadpan synthesised speech, Charles has a childlike curiosity, flummoxing Brian with toddler-esque questions like, "Can birds do what they like?" Consistently funny, the quirkiness of the premise is always tempered with genuine affection and surprising sagacity: this is really just a sweet odd-couple comedy about loneliness and friendship. **AM**



MOON, 66 QUESTIONS

★★

OUT 24 JUNE / CERT 12A / 108 MINS

DIRECTOR Jacqueline Lentzou

CAST Sofia Kokkali, Lazaros Georgakopoulos

An opening subtitle tells us that this is "a film about love, movement and flow — and the lack of them". After years of estrangement, Artemis (Sofia Kokkali) returns to Athens to care for her father, who is suffering from multiple sclerosis. Impressionistic imagery — '90s VHS footage, teenage-diary entries, an overly competitive ping-pong game — tells the story in an artful and unconventional way, but keeps the viewer at arm's length, and doesn't hang together in a strictly narrative sense. Meaning and intention hum only faintly in the background. The filmmaker's sense of empathy can't be doubted — one moving scene uses physical therapy to force a rare closeness between father and daughter — but for the most part, it's frustratingly inscrutable. **AM**



GEORGE MICHAEL: FREEDOM UN CUT

★★★★

OUT 22 JUNE / CERT TBC / 108 MINS

DIRECTORS George Michael, David Austin

CAST George Michael, Tony Bennett, Mary J. Blige, Stevie Wonder

An extended (by 13 minutes) cut of George Michael's self-co-directed 2017 documentary, *Freedom Uncut* gives the superstar the theatrical release he, and his fans, deserve. Few artists in the history of pop have been so acutely aware of their own career path as Michael. No surprise, then, that this has a heavily curated feel — and despite his candid, confessional approach, there is a sense that even by the end, we haven't really met the complex man behind the megastar. Nonetheless, it's an intimate, moving (and star-studded) tribute to a true music legend, charting his path from geeky Bushy schoolboy to globe-straddling icon. As the last personal document we have from the man, if not perfect it remains precious. Much like Michael himself. **LB**



THE BOB'S BURGERS MOVIE

★★★★

OUT NOW / CERT PG / 102 MINS

DIRECTOR Loren Bouchard

CAST H. Jon Benjamin, John Roberts, Dan Mintz, Kristen Schaal

Bob's Burgers may not have clocked as many seasons as *The Simpsons*, but its simple premise and kind-hearted characters make it a charming alternative. Bob's insular world — a failing burger restaurant on a seaside wharf — is blown up for the big screen. A murder mystery and a sinkhole threatening the restaurant's future drive the plot, while the show's scale is upgraded via fresh, vibrant new palettes and intricate set-pieces (a dance ensemble in which the characters all move slightly out of time with each other feels especially joyful). Yet as with the show, the film is strongest in its minor interactions. Throwaway lines and small acts fuelled by good intentions imbue the film with depth and warmth that never feels mawkish. **EW**



THEO AND THE METAMORPHOSIS

★★★

OUT 24 JUNE / CERT TBC / 96 MINS

DIRECTOR Damien Odoul

CAST Theo Kermel, Pierre Meunier, Sonia Gondry

Theo (Theo Kermel) is a young man with Down's syndrome who lives in a cabin in the woods with his father. Through Theo's (increasingly unreliable) narration, we learn that he is a dreamer and fantasist, who imagines himself a martial-arts expert, a photographer with a bionic eye, and "a doctor in demolition". There's a sweetness to the opening hour of this curious little film, but what begins as beguilingly joyful takes a disturbing and perplexing turn halfway through, when Theo's father leaves and a snake becomes his new muse. When the film surrenders to more surreal flights of fancy, it becomes harder to warm to. Still, there are occasional flashes of profound insight into how Theo interprets the world: "Sometimes I cry," he says. "It's like falling or burping." **JN**



Clockwise from here: At shook up — Austin Butler as Elvis; The actor plays the star from teen to his final days; Butler with Tom Hanks as the singer's manager, Colonel Tom Parker

[FILM]

ELVIS



OUT 24 JUNE / CERT TBC
159 MINS

DIRECTOR Baz Luhrmann
CAST Tom Hanks, Austin Butler, Olivia DeJonge

PLUT When Colonel Tom Parker (Hanks) spots a young singer by the name of Elvis Presley (Butler), he knows he's found something special. He has no idea just how special. Parker turns Presley into the biggest name in music, but fame does not bring Presley happiness.

IT'S BEEN CLOSE to a decade since Baz Luhrmann's last movie. Any question that time may have mellowed him is answered within the first few minutes of *Elvis*; even by Luhrmann's usual standards, the first act of this biopic is frantic with filmmaking acrobatics. Rat-a-tat editing. Dream sequences. Animated sequences. Loop-di-loop camera moves. Incongruous modern soundtrack. He immediately puts his foot down and goes racing through the life of Elvis Presley. It's one hell of a ride, but sometimes it's moving too fast for his audience to get more

than a passing look at his characters.

Luhrmann's ambitions are laudably grand. He follows Presley's (Austin Butler) life from his teens, when he's discovered playing alongside tired country music acts, to his final days as a bloated drug addict, so exhausted he can't even hold his own microphone. That's not where Luhrmann stops. He also tells the story of Colonel Tom Parker (Tom Hanks), Presley's manager, who is depicted as a scheming villain who never misses an opportunity for a buck and puts money before Presley's happiness.

And further aims to show how America changed during Presley's career, from the '50s to the '70s, especially for Black people, who Presley both supports and exploits, casually pinching influences from Black artists. Trying to squeeze in so much, even over a 159-minute running time, it's not surprising that much of it feels rushed.

Luhrmann's 'more is not nearly enough' style is at its most effective when he's dealing in broad, simple emotions. In *Moulin Rouge* or *Romeo + Juliet*, tales of desperate love at first sight, his explosive rhythms and romantic excess amplify all the primal yearning. It's when he has to pause to contemplate subtler feelings that his confidence seems to desert him. His *Great Gatsby* was a dud because he showed little care for anyone's interior lives. He was just there for the party. *Elvis* is no dud, but it again exposes Luhrmann's disinterest in digging below the surface.

Presley's story is told on a soap-opera scale, towering highs or miserable lows, and little between. The relationship between Parker and Presley feels underexplored, with the otherwise smart Presley just in dumb thrall to a man clearly manipulating him. In scenes about Presley taking songs from the mouths of Black artists, Luhrmann doesn't give a single Black character a significant voice, a surely unintended irony.

Where Luhrmann absolutely excels, making some of the best work of his career, is in showing the addictive but destructive romance between Presley and his live audience. The performance sequences are a triumph. In Presley's first live





show we see how lust spreads through the crowd like a virus, girls screaming back at him in a way he doesn't quite understand but loves. Both become hooked. As the film, and Presley's career, go on, the audience grows into an insatiable animal, devouring more and more of Presley's energy as he itches for another hit of adoration, prepared to surrender everything for it. There's a manic, sexy, almost dangerous vigour to these scenes, which tell us more about Presley's inner self than the rest of the film.

Austin Butler is sensational as Presley. It's a huge ask for an actor to disappear into a man so well known that everyone and his uncle does a bad impression of him. Butler convinces at every age, from teen to 42. He's not a particularly close visual match for Presley but he's mastered vocal inflections and imperceptible details in Presley's moves on stage that mean he captures his presence. More importantly, he gives a sense of a person, with normal insecurities, beneath the public image. Even if Lührmann shies away from finding out who that normal person is, Butler suggests he's there. Hanks' Parker is written cartoonishly and he plays it appropriately. It's not realistic but it's entertaining.

Nobody comes to a Lührmann film hoping for something *ouder* the top. This Elvis has all the dazzle and bombast you could ask, but it presents a portrait of an icon — not of a flesh-and-blood man. **OLLY RICHARDS**

VERDICT This is everything you might expect of a Baz Lührmann biopic. It's brash, loud, maximalist, and certainly never boring, but also keeps its subject at a distance, enthralled by his glamour not his soul.



"So, shall I start with a foot rub?"



[FILM]

GOOD LUCK TO YOU, LEO GRANDE

★★★★

 OUT 17 JUNE / CERT TBC
97 MINS

DIRECTOR Sophie Hyde
CAST Emma Thompson, Daryl McCormack, Isabella Laughland

PLOT Retired teacher and widow Nancy Stokes (Thompson) hires handsome sex worker Leo Grande (McCormack) to help her achieve the sexual fulfilment long missing from her marriage. Over several meetings, Leo aids Nancy in working through her anxieties to find satisfaction while also trying to keep up conjugal appearances.

THERE IS NO shortage of sexual awakening stories centred on young ladies' experience of the big O for the first time. Unfortunately, far too many women go through life without climaxing at all — and this is where comedian and screenwriter Katy Brand has stepped in to fill that orgasm gap. With Sophie Hyde on directing duties, this is an endearing, bubbly and heartening two-hander about female pleasure from a mature woman's perspective. Together with Emma Thompson and Daryl McCormack, Brand and Hyde have captured that particularly dry style of humour and matter-of-factness so typical of the British romcom, with a sex-positive flair.

Thompson gives us everything. An award-winning screenwriter herself, it's abundantly clear the actor has invested both personally and creatively in her repressed ex-schoolteacher. Nancy is a flood of contradictions: vulnerable and assertive, liberally minded but sexually conservative, straight-talking yet easily embarrassed by

phrases like "anal sex". She might be the older woman, but early on Thompson plays her almost like a 16-year-old about to pop her cherry, wide-eyed insecurity and nervous energy vibrating off her body. Like Aubrey Plaza, she has a catalogue of carnal pleasures to experience for the first time, and Leo is the man to do just that.

A calming foil to his tightly wound client, McCormack serves as a charismatic receptacle to Thompson's anxious stream-of-consciousness, as well as a mirror to her more generational, mother-knows-best prejudices. Even as you empathise with the chaotic way Nancy unpacks her fears and sexual desires, the patient mask Leo wears rarely slips; it's only her questions about his life, aspirations and reasons for being in his profession that cause his poise to falter. The underlying tension doesn't quite rip but ripples as McCormack's placid demeanour shifts, forcing a deeper interrogation for them both.

A Norwich hotel room sets the stage for this tête-à-tête; its beige decor of muted colours doesn't pull focus and dulls any erotic charge. It's not without its sensuality — at moments, the camera luxuriates in both their bodies — but naturalistic lighting grounds the encounter in the awkward, transactional reality. Navigating the power dynamic between client and sex worker, older white woman and young biracial man, Brand might have probed a bit deeper instead of tying up things so neatly. But in avoiding racial clichés and exploitative moments, her script takes great care to dissect the ambiguities around sex and sex work without shame, a lot of compassion and welcome comic relief. With bold direction, this is a healthy, relatable romp every man and woman should make time for. **HANNA FLINT**

VERDICT Deftly handled direction from Sophie Hyde and a thoroughly impressive dual performance from Emma Thompson and Daryl McCormack enlivens an electric script, tackling taboo sexual subjects with wit, flair and welcome realism.



Double trouble: chipmunk crime-fighters Chip 'n Dale make a winningly raucous return.

[FILM]

CHIP 'N DALE:
RESCUE RANGERS

★★★★

OUT NOW (DISNEY+) /
CERT PG / 87 MINS

DIRECTOR Akiva Schaffer
CAST (VOICES) John Mulaney, Andy Samberg,
Will Arnett, Eric Bana, Seth Rogen; KIKI Layne

PLOT Chip (Mulaney) and Dale (Samberg) have put their rescue-rangering days behind them, living quiet lives in Los Angeles. But when a cheese-obsessed former colleague is kidnapped, they must put their differences aside in order to rescue-ranger once more.

WITH THE BLIZZARD of '80s and '90s reboots happening right now, it was inevitable that eventually pop culture would get around to two chipmunk crime-fighters who shun clothing below the waist. Chip and Dale are a relatively deep cut, as far as Disney animals go: while created in 1943, their peak period was 1989-'90, when they headlined their own TV show, *Rescue Rangers*. By rights, their resurrection should have been a low-key affair, exciting only the most ardent enthusiasts of woodland mammals. But along the way, ambitions got raised. And the final product will surely be in contest for the most joke-packed, cameo-stuffed and just plain goofy (not to mention Goofy) movie of the summer.

While it's not technically a new film by The Lonely Island — that crackerjack comedy trio, comprised of Andy Samberg, Akiva Schaffer and Jorma Taccone, who brought us music-doe spoof *Paperstar*, *Never Stop Never Stopping* — their gleeful pawprints are all over it. It has the same estranged-buddies set-up as *Paperstar*, and the same sense of raucous, irreverent, anything-goes

fun. With *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* as the clear inspiration (Roger even makes a guest appearance), it may not reach the inky heights of Robert Zemeckis' seminal live-action/toon mash-up, but it has a hell of a good time trying.

The plot isn't particularly novel: Chip (Andy Samberg) and Dale (John Mulaney), who live among humans in the real world along with other cartoons, have fallen out since the '90s, when Dale tried to break free with a James Bond-riffing solo project. Over the course of 90 minutes, they will reunite (obviously) while on the hunt for a kidnapped *Rescue Rangers* comrade who has a huge moustache, is named after cheese and is voiced by Eric Bana (obviously). But this is all just a set-up for a whip-fast volley of inspired, silly ideas, executed with brio.

The bad guys, for instance, are dead-eyed rejects from that period of history when animators strove for photo-real verisimilitude (Zemeckis is the key inspiration for this part of the film, too; Seth Rogen's shonky Viking-warrior heavy could be straight out of *Beowulf*). These ne'er-do-wells have their base of operations in, of course, a scuzzy place called the Uncanny Valley. There are whispers of "Muppet fights". As for the heroes, while Chip remains hand-drawn, Dale has had "CG surgery", his fur now rendered cutting-edge.

In the decades since Toontown closed its doors, a lot has happened with animation. This film is at its fizziest when gleefully jabbing not only at trends, but at specific characters — a veritable multiverse of 2D madness, it throws together an army of famous cartoon faces, hailing from everything from *South Park* to *The Jungle Book*. But the funniest moments feature one who's never previously made it to the screen. Yes, brace yourself for "Ugly Sonic", proof that hedgehogs with human teeth are not always a bad idea. **NICK DE SEMIAN**

VERDICT Reminiscent of *The Happytime Murders* but actually watchable, this zippy, highly amiable rodent noir turns out to be a delightful surprise. It flings a lot of ideas at the screen — and most of them stick.



MAD GOD

★★★★

OUT 16 JUNE (SHUDDER) / CERT TBC / 83 MINS
DIRECTOR Phil Tippett
CAST (VOICES) Alex Cox, Niketa Roman,
Satish Ratakonda

VFX legend Phil Tippett has been working on *Mad God* for nearly 30 years; it's immediately clear why it took him so long. The film is a stop-motion nightmare on a vast scale, a wildly ambitious rendering of a colossal techno-industrialist underworld, the kind that would make Dante blush. There is virtually no dialogue and barely a plot. A masked, wordless 'Assassin', whose only goal seems to be annihilation, is the ostensible protagonist, passing by a cornucopia of hideous monsters — from tea-drinking insects to a faecal-based torture trap. Such stomach-churning horror and homespun scrapiness won't be for all, but there's something exciting and transgressive about it, as if designed for a smoky midnight fleapit. **JN**



FIRESTARTER

★★

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 94 MINS
DIRECTOR Keith Thomas
CAST Zac Efron, Ryan Kiera Armstrong,
Michael Greaves, Gloria Reuben

When little pyrokinetic Charlie (Ryan Kiera Armstrong) starts a fire with her brain, the inferno explodes in shoddy digital ripples. Everything about this contemporized take on Stephen King's 1980 bestseller is drably televisual. In broad strokes, it tells the same story as the 1984 Drew Barrymore version, with Charlie and her suddenly widowed telepath father, Andy (Zac Efron), fleeing a sinister government agency called The Shop. But King's narrative made more sense as a 1970s hangover, a portrait of a family man feeling the same effects of a decade reshaped by hallucinogens and Watergate. To that end, at least the film sounds era-appropriate: the throbbing synth score comes courtesy of none other than John Carpenter. **AAD**

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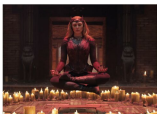
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Benedict Cumberbatch returns as Doctor Strange. Well, one of them.



From top: Karl Mordo (Chiwetel Ejiofor), America Chavez (Xochitl Gomez, middle) is in peril; Wanda (Elizabeth Olsen).

[FILM]

DOCTOR STRANGE IN THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS



OUT NOW / CERT 12A / 125 MINS

DIRECTOR Sam Raimi

CAST Benedict Cumberbatch, Rachel McAdams, Elizabeth Olsen, Benedict Wong, Xochitl Gomez

PLOT After encountering a girl (Gomez) with the power to traverse the multiverse, Stephen Strange (Cumberbatch) turns to Wanda Maximoff (Olsen) for help with fighting off the monstrous entity on the girl's trail. However, Wanda has her own agenda — one that puts, well, everything in jeopardy...

HAS THE TIME come for the Marvel Cinematic Universe to start adding a "Previously in the MCU" prologue to each of their movies? It's easy to imagine how bewildering *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* must be for a viewer not primed by recent, relevant Marvel adventures. But while this latest cinematic blast of superheroism

is almost distractingly entangled in previously woven story threads, it's great to see that it is also very much a Sam Raimi movie.

Raimi wasn't the first choice of director, having joined after Derrickson and Marvel amicably parted ways. But he's been allowed to make it all his own, with even freer rein, apparently, than he was given on his OG *Spider-Man* films. As our sorcerer hero gets tossed from crazy encounter to even crazier encounter, Raimi's camera spins and whirls with CGI-enhanced but still somehow old-school abandon. For *Evil Dead* die-hards especially, there are jump scares and creep-outs, not to mention a malevolent book (the *Darkhold*, rather than the *Necronomicon*) and a Bruce Campbell cameo. It's a treat to behold Raimi back in action.

"Action" being the key word here. The movie cold-opens in the midst of a climactic battle-from-another-universe, in which Another Doctor Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) and his dimension-hopping companion America Chavez (Xochitl Gomez) tussle with a demon made of lava and bandages. Within minutes, there's a second monster fight, this time on the streets of New York, and very soon after we get an epic showdown at sorcerer stronghold Kamar-Taj, which again has all the spectacle of any other film's finale. After that, it barely lets up for the next 80 minutes or so.

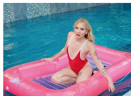
It's almost exhausting, but there's enough inventiveness to hold your focus. In one magical duel, for example, Strange weaponises the notes

from sheets of piano music, tossing them like glowing *shuriken*, which adds a fascinatingly whimsical touch to the conflict. There are surprises a-plenty, too, with a bunch of fan-pleasing guest appearances you'll just have to see to believe. And there is also a hell of a body count.

Thankfully, it's all anchored by another strong turn from Cumberbatch as Marvel's surviving arrogant-super-dude-with-impeccable-facial-hair, who still reckons with his decision to enable Thanos' snap in *Infinity War*, as well as letting the woman he loved (Rachel McAdams' Christine) slip through his fingers. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Olsen explores a scary new side to Wanda with tragically charged gusto, and newcomer Gomez brings impressive warmth and feeling to a character who might otherwise have been rendered a walking MacGuffin.

The Multiverse Of Madness is noisy, frantic and at times a little messy, but it's never less than entertaining. The MCU faithful will cheer its numerous call-backs; Raimi-heads will grove on its Raiminess; and we suspect even those bewildered, unprimed viewers will at least appreciate the way it 100 per cent lives up to its title. **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT Marvel's most deranged, energetic movie yet, as much of a winning comeback for director Sam Raimi as it is a mega-budget exercise in universal stakes-raising.



PLEASURE

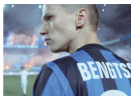
★★★★

OUT 17 JUNE / CERT TBC / 109 MINS

DIRECTOR Ninja Thyberg

CAST Sofia Kappel, Reika Anne Reustle, Evelyn Claire, Chris Cock

There are flashes of Sean Baker's influence in *Pleasure*: the beauty of a Californian sunset contrasted with the scuzziness of LA — and somewhere in-between, snippets of genuine humanity. Swedish teenager Linnéa (Sofia Kappel, in an extraordinary screen debut) rechristens herself 'Bella Cherry' and sets out to be an American porn star. The tale is familiar — the naive starlet embroiled in an exploitative industry — but first-time feature director Ninja Thyberg is unflinching in showing the industry's gristlier side. Yet the film takes a refreshingly matter-of-fact approach to sex-work, and suggests there is room for a safe, boundary-driven environment — even in a scene involving double-anal penetration. **UN**



TIGERS

★★★★

OUT 1 JULY / CERT TBC / 116 MINS

DIRECTOR Ronnie Sandahl

CAST Erik Eng, Frida Gustavsson, Alfred Enoch, Liv Mjølhus

Signed at 17 by Inter Milan, Swedish footballer Martin Bengtsson had not only achieved his dream, but that of millions of boys like him. Adapting his autobiography, writer/director Ronnie Sandahl captures how this dream turned into a nightmare as the player struggled to cope. Erik Eng is bracingly raw in the lead, restrained but allowing glimpses of the maelstrom bubbling under the surface. Intimate close-ups and disorienting angles from cinematographer Marek Wieser accentuate Bengtsson's deteriorating state, while Jonas Colstrup's score — stirring strings when Bengtsson is on the pitch, discordant tones as he suffers off it — further underscores the dangerous secrecy surrounding mental health in elite sport. **NB**

Harper (Jessie Buckley) watches her back.



[FILM]

MEN

★★★★

OUT NOW
CERT 15 / 100 MINS

DIRECTOR Alex Garland

CAST Jessie Buckley, Rory Kinnear, Paapa Essiedu

PLOT After her husband dies, Harper (Buckley) goes on a rural getaway to try and heal. Once there, she runs into several men (all played by Kinnear), who start acting strangely around her. Intensely creepy goings-on ensue.

WITH ALEX GARLAND movies, generally, you should expect the unexpected. A body, frozen in death, made beautiful by delicate climbing plants. Human cries for help in the mouth of a skeletal bear. A shaven-headed Oscar Isaac disco-dancing. With *Men*, the inimitable writer and director moves away from the science-fiction DNA of previous projects — but in digging into the fresh ground of full-on folk horror, he also delivers a film somewhat more predictable, if still compelling, than we've seen from him before.

Jessie Buckley is magnetic as Harper, a widow seeking solace from the traumatic events around the death of her husband by heading to a picturesque country house, often carrying huge chunks of the film without uttering a word of dialogue. She encounters multiple men during her stay, which, as we know from the trailer, are all played by Rory Kinnear — a concept left largely unexplained. There's Geoffrey, the blundering, "very country" (as Harper describes him) landlord of the home she's renting; Samuel, a schoolboy with a weird mask and a bad attitude (the less said about the CG attempt to put Kinnear's face on a child's body, the better — think pre-serum Steve Rogers); a vicar with an antiquated view or two; a policeman with

a lacklustre sense of duty; and two menacing pub-goers. Each undermines or insults Harper eventually — some subtly, some not-so — with the usual concoction of sexism, gaslighting and crude banter. Kinnear is astonishingly chameleonic, reinventing himself entirely with every character, and fully committing to the film's bonkers, bloodier moments.

Hoo boy, do the moments get bonkers and bloody — but not before Garland's notched up the tension so high, the air is thick with it. Your stomach churns with it. Harper's glimpses of peace are interrupted by near-constant unwanted male presence. The lush greenery surrounding her feels at once cheering and like it could swallow her up. Warped choral sounds, droning basslines and Harper's melodic yelps into a pitch-black tunnel echo in your ears. Rob Hardy's cinematography is glorious, jumping from bright, British landscapes and bold silhouettes to glaring, devilish red light in a heartbeat. The horror beats don't feel particularly new, but they are executed very, very well.

As effective as Harper's discomfort is — as it turns out, men really are quite frightening — it needs to lead somewhere. It needs to be for something. We've watched the harassment of women on screen too many times just to see another movie telling us how rough it is out there to be a feminine-presenting person. *Men's* climax is wild, and filled with un-seizable imagery in a way that will satisfy fans of the gory and grotesque, but too often leaves Harper inactive, watching mind-boggling events unfold before her or being subjected to misogynistic monologuing instead. Though *Men's* take on the cyclic nature of toxic masculinity is interesting, and the film around it impeccably made, much of it simply ends up feeling fairly one-note. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT

Alex Garland once again shows an unmatched ability to conjure a beautifully uneasy atmosphere, the sense of which lingers on past the closing credits — but the substance underneath doesn't quite connect.



Clockwise from left: Millie Bobby Brown as Eleven; David Harbour as Hopper; The dark side: Joyce (Winona Ryder) and Murray (Brett Gelman).

[TV]

STRANGER THINGS: SEASON 4, VOLUME 1



CUT NOW [NETFLIX] /
EPISODES VIEWED 6 OF 7

SHOWRUNNERS Matt Duffer, Ross Duffer
CAST Millie Bobby Brown, David Harbour, Winona Ryder, Finn Wolfhard, Sadie Sink, Noah Schnapp, Caleb McLaughlin, Gaten Matarazzo, Natalia Dyer, Charlie Heaton, Maya Hawke, Joe Keery

PLOT The events of the Starcourt Mall battle, and the upheaval of the Byers' move to the West Coast, continue to take a toll on the gang. But as kids from Hawkins High start meeting gruesome ends, it's clear there's a new mythical monster on the scene that will need them to work together to take down.

FRIENDS MAY NOT lie, but they do grow up — and grow apart. This is the challenge facing the *Stranger Things* kids as we meet them in the fourth season, long before any kind of dimension-hopping demon rears its inevitably ugly head. After the events of the Season 3 finale, they're

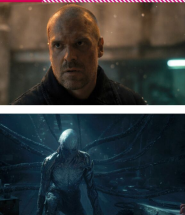
more scattered than we've ever seen them before. In California, Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) is struggling with school bullies and the absence of her powers, Jonathan (Charlie Heaton) is getting high with new friend Argyle (Eduardo Franco), and Joyce (Winona Ryder) is working in telemarketing. (Will is... painting? That's all we know; Noah Schnapp's soulful performance is, yet again, neglected).

In Hawkins, Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) and Mike (Finn Wolfhard) are part of new D&D group the Hellfire Club, lead by drug-dealing anarchist Eddie (Joseph Quinn), and feel like Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin) is drifting away after joining the basketball team; Max (Sadie Sink, a particular standout) is still grieving brother Billy (Dacre Montgomery); Nancy (Natalia Dyer) is editor of the school newspaper; and Steve (Joe Keery) and Robin (Maya Hawke) are navigating dating drama while working at the local video store. Somehow, Hopper (David Harbour) has returned, very much alive and trapped in snowy Russia as a Soviet prisoner. The distance between the characters — whether geographically, emotionally, or both — sets the scene for *Stranger Things*' most grown-up season yet, in all kinds of ways.

With previous runs of the show seeing kids possessed, killed, and melted down to become part of the Mind Flayer, this has never exactly been fun for the whole family, but this new batch of episodes really dials the darkness and horror elements up to, well, Eleven. The central conundrum is finding the culprit behind a string



of incredibly violent, disturbing deaths. New villain Vecna is a chilling, Freddy Krueger-esque presence; sinewy, with huge claws, he uses your worst nightmares as his most terrifying weapon. It touches on alcoholism, bulimia, suicide and depression — "Chapter Four", the best of the



blunch, climaxes in a narrow escape from the void almost as emotionally gut-punching as the use of the bagel-shaped black hole in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. It's not all doom and gloom – the show's witty, nostalgic sheen is still ever-present – but the more adult lens, plus the shift in location for Eleven (in earlier episodes especially) makes for a much-needed refresh and reinvigoration that the sunny setting of Season 3 didn't quite achieve.

The trickiest thing for the show to tackle is the now fairly unwieldy ensemble. With the addition of several new faces, there are nearly 20 key characters that the screenplay has to juggle – and we're verging on storyline overload. Hopper's thread feels entirely separate, unnecessary, and barely in touch with the show's lore, with David Harbour vastly underused so far. We're rushing from one plot point to another, not always sure where we're heading and why, and while you're always having fun with whoever's on screen, it leaves little time for true character development – there are only glimpses, mostly given to Max, Eleven and Mike.

Though it feels over-crowded at times, what remains is the compelling comfort and charisma of the world first introduced nearly six years ago. The clean, colourful cinematography, pockets of pure chemistry, and sprawling, *Scoby-Deo*-style mysteries that make Hawkins such a fun place to hang out (even with all the Demogorgons) are all present and correct. This time, it's taken up a notch with extra filmmaking flair – most evident in the camera swinging seamlessly into the Upside Down, and an impressive out-of-the-blue one-take shootout – and tying in timely themes like the Satanic Panic, Vietnam aftermath and increased Cold War hostilities. If you're looking for evidence of the Duffer's' grand plan going into the fifth and final season, it hasn't come to light just yet – but that doesn't make the journey any less entertaining. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT It may have more characters than it knows what to do with, but *Stranger Things*' most sinister season yet still knows how to send shivers up your spine.

Frankly, they'd skimped on body armour.



[TV] HALO: SEASON 1

★★★★

EPISODES VIEWED 7 OF 9
OUT 22 JUNE (PARAMOUNT+)

SHOWRUNNERS Kyle Killen, Steven Kane
CAST Pablo Schreiber, Yerlin Ha, Natascha McElhone, Jen Taylor

PLOT In the 26th century, humanity is at war with a coalition of alien races known as the Covenant. When a mysterious artefact makes its way into the hands of Spartan supersoldier the Master Chief (Schreiber), it not only escalates the conflict but triggers unforeseen changes in the Chief himself.

THE FIRST THING you notice going into Paramount's new flagship sci-fi series is that it does not fuck about. Within the opening ten minutes, we witness a group of wayward teenagers mercilessly butchered by Sangheili Elites, a bunker of cowering children casually ganned down where they hide, and an entire settlement slaughtered in the time it would take to make a round of tea and biscuits. If you were expecting an all-ages romp over which to bond with your gamer kids, then you might want to look elsewhere.

While drawn from the Byzantine mythology of Microsoft's *Halo* games, the series has made the sagacious decision to sever ties with 21 years of piled-up lore about Forerunners, Precursors, Prophets, Banished and other dramatic nouns with capital letters. It is in this new, unsullied timeline that we find the emerald-plated John-117, aka the Master Chief, here embodied in the 6' 5" frame of Pablo Schreiber (*Orange Is The New Black*). Unlike in the games (or Pedro Pascal in *The Mandalorian*), Schreiber spends much of the show with his face on display, lending both humanity and intensity to a character largely a cipher before now. The show delves

deeper into the man beneath the metal, drawing out a damaged vulnerability through both Schreiber's performance and the character's relationships with Yerlin Ha's teenage refugee and Natascha McElhone's mad-eyed scientist, Dr Halsey. John isn't a 'good' man – he's a seasoned killer, forged into an unfeeling weapon by years of physical, psychological and chemical abuse.

The broader setting is gratifyingly murky, too, with humanity's UNSC quickly established as no less ruthless, bloodthirsty or up for a bit of light child-murder than the Covenant. Meanwhile, their harsh colonial rule has birthed fractured underclasses, from insurgents to pirates (including an excellent Bokeem Woodbine). It's here that we find the show's secondary plotline, in which Ha's Kwan tries to free her home planet of Madrigal. But while this provides texture, it also slows things down, drawing us reluctantly away from the Chief, the search to uncover his past, and the mystery of the alien relic.

Sometimes this deliberate pacing leaves room for interesting character work – Kate Kennedy's Kai-125 going through her own self-awakening, Charlie Murphy's Makee, who has grown up among the Covenant – but oftentimes just leads to long, uneventful detours and stuffy info dumps. When the action does come, it generally delivers – you'll just need a little patience getting to it.

Spielberg, Jackson, Blomkamp and Garland are just a few of the names that have attempted this adaptation over the years. Now that it's finally here, *Halo* does an admirable job of transforming the series' first-person firefights into a compelling, serialised drama. It won't trouble *Arcom's* place as the current benchmark for video-game adaptations, but the show captures the chunky, tactile quality of the Master Chief perfectly, and its involving, surprisingly grim take on the *Halo* universe is one we'd like to see more of. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT Halo to the Chief? Not quite, but despite some uneven plotting, this is a worthy adaptation that promises better things to come.

ON SCREEN

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Bad-boy superhero Homelander (Antony Starr), still full in the frame.

[TV]

THE BOYS: SEASON 3

★★★★

CUT NOW (PRIME VIDEO)
EPISODES VIEWED 5 OF 8

SHOWRUNNER Eric Kripke
CAST Karl Urban, Jack Quaid, Antony Starr, Erin Moriarty, Claudia Doumit, Jensen Ackles

PLOT A year after the events of last season, Butcher (Urban) is working for the government under the supervision of Hughie (Quaid), who runs the 'Office of Supe Affairs' with Victoria (Doumit). But even a subdued Homelander (Starr) is still dangerous. The answer to taking him down may lie with the original Supe, Soldier Boy (Ackles).

MUCH HAS CHANGED since we last checked in on Billy Butcher and co. *The Boys* is no longer the only game in town when it comes to gory, superpowered-beings-gone-bad content: the brightly animated *Invincible* did not skimp on the blood-soaked gruesomeness, and both *The Suicide Squad* and *Peacemaker* featured their fair share of over-the-top fatalities. But any concerns that *The Boys'* capacity to shock has dimmed in the context of its new counterparts are emphatically blown out of the water within the first ten minutes, thanks to an Ant-Man riff so completely outrageous that it really has to be seen to be believed.

Shocking for very different reasons is legendary Supe-hater Butcher (Karl Urban) acquiring powers of his own after taking super-serum Compound V. Such a shift in thinking underlines the big questions that multiple characters have to continually ask themselves this season: How far are you willing to go to get the job done, and what are you willing to give up to get it? Hughie's (Jack Quaid) desire not to feel weak, for instance, puts a strain on his

relationship with Starlight (Erin Moriarty), while Marvin (Laz Alonso) has to weigh spending quality time with his daughter against getting justice for his family. Through it all, the moral murkiness and messy consequences are never less than compelling in a season that blurs the line between the good guys and the bad guys more than ever before. It's not just a question of who will still be standing when all is said and done, but what state they will be in if they are.

Queen Maeve (Dominique McElligott) is a bit shortchanged by the material in early episodes, but other subplots are heartfelt. Kimiko (Karen Fukuhara) and Frenchie (Tomer Capone) are even more of a fun, sweet pairing now that the latter has learned sign language — an unlikely dance number they enjoy is a riot — and some welcome backstory for the duplicitous Victoria is all the more effective for Claudia Doumit's affecting performance. The satirical elements remain just as sharp too, ranging from A-Train's (Jessie T. Usher) performative stance on racism and the Black Lives Matter movement to a 'Dawn Of The Seven' movie that is an entertaining riff on *The Snyder Cut*.

At the centre of it all is Homelander (Antony Starr). *The Boys'* second season showed how far he would go to remain beloved by his unsuspecting fans. But what happens when that's no longer a consideration? It's just one more thing that number him among the scariest superpowered characters we've ever seen on screen, and Starr plays him to perfection. Indeed, Homelander's unpredictable nature has always been *The Boys'* trump card in relation to other contemporary superhero content. You never know when he might snap — no one ever feels truly safe. It's a big reason why, three seasons in, *The Boys* remains so riveting to watch. **AMON**

VERDICT *The Boys'* third season doesn't forget to deepen its characters while delivering its requisite bloodbaths and 'holy shit!' moments.

ON SCREEN CHECKLIST

Your at-a-glance view of this month's reviews



FILM OUT NOW

THE BAD BOYS: RIDE OR DIE ★★★★★ PG

CHIP 'N' DALE: RESCUE RANGERS ★★★★★ PG

DOCTOR STRANGE IN THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS ★★★★★ PG

FIRESTARTER ★★ PG

MEN ★★★★★ PG

TOP GUN: MAVERICK ★★★★★ PG

16 JUNE

NAD GGO ★★★★★ PG

17 JUNE

CHA CHA REAL SMOOTH ★★★★★ PG

EVERYTHING WENT FINE ★★★★★ PG

GOOD LUCK TO YOU, LEO GRANDE ★★★★★ PG

PLEASURE ★★★★★ PG

22 JUNE

GEORGE MICHAEL: FREEDOM UNCUT ★★★★★ PG

24 JUNE

THE BLACK PHONE (BOOK) ★★★★★ PG

ELVIS ★★★★★ PG

MOON, OR QUESTIONS ★★ PG

THEO AND THE METAMORPHOSIS ★★★★★ PG

1 JULY

NITRAM ★★★★★ PG

TIGERS ★★★★★ PG

8 JULY

BRIAN AND CHARLES ★★★★★ PG

TV

OUT NOW

THE BOYS: SEASON 3 ★★★★★ PG

STRANGER THINGS: SEASON 4, VOLUME 1 ★★★★★ PG

22 JUNE

HALO: SEASON 1 ★★★★★ PG

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THE WORLD





IS CHANGED

So said once a wise
Elf named Galadriel. And
she was right — because
with the arrival of
**The Lord Of The Rings:
The Rings Of Power**,
the biggest TV show of all
time, Middle-earth is
getting a radical reboot.
From new lands to new
dangers, its creators tell
us why we should
hold on tight

WORDS BY AL HORNBER

Now, where have we heard this story before?

Two unlikely heroes. Far away from the quiet shire they call home. The fate of Middle-earth in their hands. A perilous journey ahead. "We really did feel a lot like Frodo and Sam being handed the Ring," laughs JD Payne, recalling the day he and Patrick McKay — childhood friends from McLean, Virginia — received the news they were being entrusted with writing a new chapter in the grandest fantasy mythology the world has ever known. Like the heroic Hobbits of J.R.R. Tolkien's literary epics, and later Peter Jackson's acclaimed movie adaptations, they were surprise selections for such a quest. "There were so many people who pitched for this show with résumés that, on paper, were more suited to an endeavour of this magnitude," admits McKay, addressing the Múmakil in the room: that he and Payne, with only a few credits to their name, for rewrites on movies like *Star Trek Beyond* and *Jungle Cruise*, were embarking on this mission as relative unknowns. And like Samwise and Frodo, these showrunners would be completing their quest under an Eye Of Sauron-level intense watchful glare.

The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power stakes a good claim to being the biggest, most highly anticipated TV show of all time. Its first season alone cost Amazon, bankrolling the series as a flagship show for their Prime Video service, \$250 million for the rights, and a staggering \$462 million to create (minus a large tax rebate), according to reports. For the first time on screen, it imagines new characters and events within Middle-earth, instead of simply translating Tolkien's prose. In the first 24 hours after it debuted online, the show's teaser trailer was watched a record-breaking 257 million times. Intrigue levels are higher than the peak of *Game of Thrones*; this, after all, is the series that promises to escalate the streaming wars from a skirmish to a full-blown Battle Of Helm's Deep, reuniting fans with the most famous realm in fantasy. No wonder Payne and McKay — who, for the record, are a good few inches taller than their Hobbit compatriots in this analogy — have been feeling like Sam and



Clockwise from main: Harfoots assemble! Meet the new — or rather, old — breed of Hobbits; Robert Aramayo swaps Thrones for Rings as Elf Elrond; Dwarf royalty Dina (Sophia Nomvete) and Durin IV (Dylan Arthur); Showrunners JD Payne and Patrick McKay flank director J.A. Bayona on set.





Frodo. A great weight rests on their shoulders, a precious opportunity at their feet.

But the similarities between the Hobbits' journey to Mount Doom and the path to making *The Rings Of Power* is where the resemblance to Jackson's movies end. "We didn't want to do the TV version of *Lord Of The Rings*," says McKay. "We wanted to do a story in Middle-earth that deserves its own space on the shelf, alongside the novels and films." Payne agrees: "We had to ensure we were bringing something fresh to it and expanding the map. We weren't interested in a sequel or prequel or a rehash or nostalgia. It had to stand on its own two feet as something that felt faithful—but also its own thing."

Easier said than done. *The Rings Of Power* is a show tasked with taking notes from the appendices in Tolkien's *The Return Of The King*—bits of backstory the author elected not to include in the main text of his books, because it would slow the story down—and weaving them into prestige-TV magic. It can't reread the *Lord Of The Rings* stories we've already seen on screen—but it must capture the trademark Tolkien warmth and emotion that Jackson bottled so well. Succeed, and Payne, McKay and their fellowship of filmmakers will step into legend this September. Fail, and Middle-earth—or at least, fans' hopes of an enthralling new entry in one of the greatest swords-and-sorcery stories ever told—will fall into darkness. How, by the beard of Durin, do you balance all that while crafting a return to Middle-earth?

The trick, it turns out, was not to return to Middle-earth at all. At least, not to the one you remember.

FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO

don't know your Orcs from your elbows, a quick history lesson. The events depicted in *The Lord Of The Rings* are a speck of sand in the hourglass of the timeline of Middle-earth, explains Payne: "Tolkien's legendarium is this enormous tapestry that stretches 9000 years." In the beginning was the First Age: centuries of bloodshed as Elves did battle with Morgoth, the first Dark Lord. The Third Age is the era explored in *The Lord Of The Rings*' *The War Of The Ring* and all the events of Jackson's films. Bung in the middle is The Second Age, a time that "contains some of the greatest stories from Tolkien's mythos," Payne continues. "It's the story fans have always wanted to see fleshed out, but until now has only really been told in whispers." *The Rings Of Power* takes those whispers and cranks them up into a deafening war-cry. Set across before the adventures of Bilbo Baggins, the series aims to spend five seasons exploring how Sauron rose, how the mythical island of Númenor fell—and the forging of 19 rings that would ultimately shape Middle-earth's destiny.

"It's a very interesting time," says *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* director JA. Bayona,





who helms the first two episodes. "War has ended, but peace hasn't settled yet. There are characters who have an intuition that evil is not finished yet. They face a lot of denial. Across all these different worlds, you're seeing characters deal with the impact of war and their suspicion that there's more to come."

At the heart of a huge ensemble cast is Galadriel, the ethereal Lady Of The Golden Wood played by Cate Blanchett in Peter Jackson's trilogy. Here, she's a hungry warrior unafraid to battle a snow beast or two and get involved with the action. "It was like being on a school trip! I got to do swimming, riding, climbing..." shares Morfydd Clark, the Welsh star of Brit horror *Saint Maud* who plays her. "Galadriel is legendary. Tolkien himself is legendary!" the 33-year-old laughs. This version of Galadriel "still has a lot to learn," she says. "I had to find that balance between someone

who has got an element of the eternal but hasn't yet seen it all. Don't expect the same character that you meet later on."

The same might be said of *The Rings Of Power*'s other familiar names. Elrond Half-elfen, as we met him in Jackson's trilogy, was a wise if slightly world-weary Elf-leader played by Hugo Weaving. The younger version we meet in *The Rings Of Power*, 1,000-or-so years old (a *proper* Millennial), is "much more acerbic, with a willingness to step into the unknown," says the man who plays him, *Game Of Thrones* alum Robert Aramayo.

Also different is Gil-Galad, the last High King Of The Noldor in later years, slightly less sure on his feet as this less-seasoned Second Age ruler. "King of the Elves, man! How cool is that?" booms acclaimed stage actor Benjamin Walker, describing the long-reigning warrior and politician. "During wartime, he rose to the occasion, and during peacetime, he is fighting to

maintain that peace. Oftentimes that means using people to his advantage, but—in the way we wish that our real-life politicians were—he strives to bring out the best in everyone."

These Fellowship-era favourites traverse Middle-earth in *The Rings Of Power*, encountering characters and events either based on notes in Tolkien's appendices or made up entirely. In the former camp is a band of Harfoots, ancestors to the Hobbits. They're led by an elder named Sador, played by Lenny Henry, and feature an adventurous free-spirit in the number, called Nori, played by Australian newcomer Markella Kavenagh. "She's very inquisitive and resolute," Kavenagh says of her character, who she hints is torn between her dedication to her family, and her hunger to search the world for ways to improve the Harfoots' way of life. "She longs for adventure, and that sometimes makes her a troublemaker, for better or worse."



Clockwise from
main: Middle-
earth as you've
never seen it
before; Lenny
Henry lights the
way in Harfoot
Sadoc Burrows;
High King
Gil-galad
(Benjamin
Walker) in his
glad rags;
Bronwyn
(Jazaran
Bonadi), Arwen
(Ismael Cruz
Córdova) and
Theo (Tyroe
Murphy) have
seen something
remarkable.



Lenny Henry, meanwhile, has "got to be the tallest Hobbit in history," he laughs (his real-life height is 6'3"). "We're a nomadic tribe, moving with the weather and the fertility of the crops. We have big caravans on wooden wheels and we're very good at hiding, because humans are much bigger than us and bring trouble," he says, shining some light on his kind-hearted community. "We're the traditional Tolkien little guy. Traditionally, the little people in this world provide comedy but also got to be incredibly brave. You're going to see us run the full gamut of emotions and actions in this adventure."

The word "Harfoot" appears exactly seven times in Tolkien's texts. How, then, did Payne and McKay dream up all the details necessary to make them a driving force of *The Rings Of Power*? "It was like Tolkien put some stars in the sky and let us make out the constellations," Payne explains, poetically. In his letters [particularly in one to his publisher], Tolkien talked about wanting to leave behind a mythology that "left scope for other minds and hands, wielding the tools of point, music and drama." We're doing what Tolkien wanted. As long as we felt like every invention of ours was true to his essence, we knew we were on the right track."

As well as characters who are new, and old characters who feel new, *The Rings Of Power* also boasts locations we've never seen before in screen iterations of Middle-earth. Or at least, have never been seen in this form. The show takes viewers to the Dwarven kingdom of Moria—in later years an abandoned mine, but in this Second Age, the thriving home of two other key characters, Dwarf prince and princess Durin IV and Disa, rulers of the subterranean realm of Khazad-dûm. "Visually, it's unlike anything we've ever seen before," promises Sophia Nomvete, who plays Disa. "It's pretty spectacular."

"Unlike anything we've seen before" is a recurrent phrase when speaking to those involved in the series—even compared to the 2000s smash-hit movies that swept to 17 Oscars. Peter Jackson had no involvement and has not yet met the showrunners. "Anyone approaching *Lord Of The Rings* on screen would be wrong not to think about how wonderfully right [Jackson] got so much of it," says McKay. "But we're admirers from afar, that's it. The *Rings Of Power* doesn't try to compete with him."

Case in point? The show's action, which will find new ways to thrill, separate from the epic armies of Jackson's trilogy. "The siege at Helm's Deep is so iconic and amazing that it was like, 'What's a different thing that we can do that still feels like Middle-earth but is unique for this story?'" asks Payne. "The show has a lot of action in it—more so than any television or streaming show that we've seen. Every episode has set-pieces, creatures, battles and white-knuckle fights to the death," adds McKay. "But instead of having 10,000 Orcs fighting 10,000 men, what's it like to have one Orc in your face,

**Clockwise from
main: New
character Elanor
'Nori' Brandyfoot
(Markella
Kavenagh);
Morfydd Clark
as the young
Galadriel; Sadoc
takes the lead
"Aaaaand... Eff
action!"**



in your kitchen? What's it like trying to kill an Orc when you've never killed an Orc before?"

It isn't just other iterations of Middle-earth that *The Rings Of Power* seeks to separate itself from. This show attempts to surpass all TV that's gone before it. "*The Rings Of Power* is not television," says Bayona, as serious as Aragorn charging the Black Gate. "It's a new form we're creating here."

WHEN IS A TV SERIES NOT

a TV series? When it's a 50-hour movie. "That's really how we've approached *The Rings Of Power*," says McKay, explaining how—unlike practically all other TV shows, which survive from season to season based on ratings—Amazon have already commissioned five seasons, which the duo have already mapped out in full. "We even know what our final shot of the last episode is going to be," teases Payne. "The rights that Amazon bought were for





MAGIG CIRCLES

Middle-earth doesn't have the monopoly on powerful rings



FLASH GORDON

As formidable as Ming the Merciless' beard is his magical ring. With a sinister red glow and hypnosis powers, it's the ultimate supervillain accessory. And if your plan goes awry, you can vaporize yourself with it. Sorted!



GREEN LANTERN

We can't talk about kick-ass rings without mentioning Green Lantern's. The most powerful weapon in the universe in the right hands, the ensorcelled rock is fuelled by pure willpower, capable of doing anything its wearer dares imagine. Except for making a good superhero movie, apparently.



SHANG-CHI AND THE LEGEND OF THE TEN RINGS

Forget the One Ring: in Shang-Chi's MCU debut, the valet-turned-superhero acquires ten magical bands. Granting users immortality, enhancing strength, shooting off whopping energy blasts, manipulating the elements, and being used as boomerang-like projectiles, Shang-Chi's rings are more than mere snazzy armbands — but also are snazzy armbands.



UNCUT GEMS

The appearance of basketball player Kevin Garnett's Championship ring in *Uncut Gems* is spellbinding — and plays a key role in jeweller Howard Ratner's ultimate downfall. Howard pawns it, leading to his operatic downward spiral. He thinks it's magical, and while it isn't, it's a ring of power, indeed. **JORDAN KING**

a 50-hour show. They knew from the beginning that was the size of the canvas — this was a big story with a clear beginning, middle and end. There are things in the first season that don't pay off until Season 5."

The attention to detail lavished on this vision of Middle-earth certainly sounds like it surpasses most TV shows. "We dived into caves and stood on glaciers to make *The Rings Of Power*," says producer Ron Ames, who's worked on everything from *Avatar* to *Avengers: Age Of Ultron*, and credits this show as perhaps the biggest thing he's undertaken. While shooting the series in New Zealand (it's moving to the UK for Season 2), "we wanted every race and every part of Middle-earth to be unique and different from the other, so we had to think through all the cultural references of each," he says. "I love the Dwarven kingdom, for example. How could they build a society beneath the earth? How would you grow their food? How would you exchange air? How would you channel water and where would light trickle in?" To find out, the creative team behind the show explored caves across New Zealand. For another scene, involving a showdown with a snow-troll, they got into helicopters to visit a frozen waterfall that would help them map out the scene.

The sets constructed across Season 1's two-year shoot were enormous, as the show sought to lean into practical effects rather than computer wizardry. The sensation of being able to walk around these fully realised locations was surreal, says Payne. "Stepping into [the Elvish harbour] Lindon for the first time, and meeting all these characters in full costume — again and again, you had this feeling of being transported." Morfydd Clark, meanwhile, claims she "was not aware of how limited my imagination is until I stepped onto the set. It was like, 'Oh my God, I have the imagination of a paper bag compared to this!'"

Is that what the biggest budget ever for a single season of TV buys you, then? "Well..." laughs Payne, without confirming or denying the reported numbers. "We think it's important to keep the budget in context. Really, this [season] is an eight-hour movie. This is the length of three Marvel films, done on the schedule of two, for the budget of one. Look at it in the context of what's actually being produced and you could say that it's a bargain."

PERHAPS THE BUDGET FOR

The Rings Of Power had to be enormous. Times of war, after all, call for bolstered artillery. The show will compete this autumn with another prequel series, inspired by Middle-earth but now a competitor to its fantasy crown: *Game Of Thrones* spin-off *House Of The Dragon*. In the eight years Tolkien's creation has lain dormant since *The Hobbit: The Battle Of The Five Armies*, George R. R. Martin's tales of Westerns have sent the TV fantasy genre careening into darker, bloodier territory. Did anything about

Clockwise from

main: On point; A gathering of Elves; Celebrimbor (Charles Edwards); Largo (Dylan Smith); Nori and Nely (Megan Richards); Osmi (Charlie Vickers); as Halbrand.

Payne and McKay's approach to *The Rings Of Power* change because of that altered landscape?

"You can psych yourself out in keeping up with the Joneses, but one of the mantras on this was 'go back to the source material.' What would Tolkien do?" replies McKay. "Some of these other competing properties — they play one octave really beautifully. But Tolkien was playing every note on the piano. He had that variety of tones. There's the whimsy, friendship and humour that *Harry Potter* is so beloved for — but there's sophistication, politics, history, mythology and depth, too. So for us, it was about going deeper into what we are, rather than worrying about what other folks are doing."

There is darkness to *The Rings Of Power*, however, make no mistake. "We're dealing with one of the greatest villains that's ever been created in Sauron," says Payne. "And one of the central figures in the story is the character of Celebrimbor [Charles Edwards]. He's an Elven smith who was manipulated into helping create the Rings Of Power. We're excited to be bringing him to Middle-earth. He's very mysterious."

Gloom is baked into *The Lord Of The Rings*, the first seeds of which were born when Tolkien was fighting at the Somme in World War I. "But part of what makes these stories so special," McKay says, "is their optimism and life-affirming humanism." Payne nods in agreement: "*Lord Of The Rings* doesn't skirt over the darkness. It takes you to the steps of Cirith Ungol and the lair of Shelob, where friends are betraying each other and characters are being dragged into Mordor. It's a harrowing experience you go through. But in the end, there's always a star in the sky that says, 'Keep going.' We wanted to find that spirit in this series."

Lenny Henry feels the show's impact could be profound. Growing up in the West Midlands, a stone's throw from where Tolkien grew up, he loved fantasy but felt alienated by the exclusion of people of colour. *The Rings Of Power*'s more diverse cast offers a welcome course-correct for the genre, he says. "If you can't see it, you can't be it. Finally, in this show, kids are going to see people of colour taking up space in the centre of a fantasy series. We're very visible in this world and that's very exciting."

Morfydd Clark also has high aspirations. She read *The Hobbit* in year six at school and





remembers the transportive pull of the Shire and vivid colours of Tolkien's prose. "It was the first adult book I read. Being Welsh, I was brought up on myths and magic, so it spoke to me," she says. When the series hits screens this September, she hopes that "a 12-year-old feels the way I did reading *The Hobbit* for the first time – inspired and excited," she says. "I want people who watch it to want to be part of our world."

Payne and McKay beam at that prospect. In the end, that's what they're here for – to introduce others to a world that's been a near-lifelong obsession for each of them (McKay discovered the books in seventh grade, while Payne became enraptured with the world after watching Jackson's films). "The pressure would drive us insane if we didn't feel like there was a story here that didn't come from us. It comes from a bigger place," says McKay. "It came from Tolkien and we're just the stewards of it. We trust those ideas so deeply, because they're not ours. We're custodians, at best."

The pair take the Frodo and Sam analogy for one last spin before they depart, to explain their hopes for the future of their defiantly different take on Tolkien. "Right now, it feels like we're making our way up the mountain. The question has been: what happens when we get to the top?" says McKay. "Now I realise, that's where the real adventure begins."

The Rings Of Power takes us to a different Middle-earth, and that's just the way its creators like it. Now, where have we heard this story before? The answer is: we haven't. ●

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER IS ON
PRIME VIDEO FROM 3 SEPTEMBER



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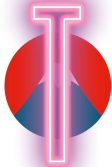
THE

A full-page background image featuring Brad Pitt in a blue uniform and cap, holding a handgun, inside a train car. The train car has shelves with various items, including a pink Pokémon (Poliwhirl) and a green bag. The word "RAILS" is written in large, stylized, blue-outlined letters across the middle of the image.

RAILS

DAVID LEITCH'S ACTION EXTRAVAGANZA **BULLET TRAIN** SEES SOME
GRISLY ASSASSINS RIPPING THROUGH JAPAN — ON WHEELS. THE DIRECTOR,
STAR BRAD PITT AND MORE TELL US HOW THEY CLUNG ON FOR THEIR LIVES

WORDS JOHN HUGGENT



THE JAPANESE SHINKANSEN train — widely referred to in English as the ‘bullet train’ — has a spotless safety record. In over five decades of service, and over ten billion passengers, there has never been so much as a minor collision. In public transport terms, it is surely the safest way to travel. So what happens when you chuck around half-a-dozen cold-blooded killers onto one and let them run riot?

That’s the premise of the efficiently titled *Bullet Train*, which sees an international cadre of assassins on a single Shinkansen train, all fighting — potentially, to the death — over a single briefcase full of money. “I have actually taken this particular journey,” says Brad Pitt, who plays one of said assassins, working under the operational codename ‘Ladybug’, “From Tokyo to Kyoto. It’s a special train trip.” At no point on that journey, however, did he encounter samurai swords, an anime mascot, or a complex web of global criminality vying for one steel suitcase.

Forged in the chaotic latter half of 2020, when Hollywood was still only just grinding back to life from Covid shutdowns, it is a film specifically moulded to be lightly ludicrous and nakedly entertaining, a bright response to the dark headlines of the day. For director David Leitch — the stuntman-turned-filmmaker who, with the likes of *John Wick*, *Atomic Blonde* and *Deadpool 2*, has become one of modern action’s loudest advocates — it was an opportunity to spark up some old-fashioned blockbuster glee. The film, he says, just went “in the direction of joy”.

Brian Tyree Henry, who plays another of the assassins, agrees: “We started filming that movie at, like, the crux of the world. We were in the thick of the pandemic, the [2020 US Presidential] election was coming up. Everyone was mad. What better movie to do than one where you can come and, like, try to kill all your peers?” He laughs. “It was very cathartic.”

This is a summer blockbuster that seems to know exactly what it is: an absurd, balls-to-the-wall, go-for-broke action-comedy, played out at 200 mph. With more than just tickets being punched, it’s fair to say that the Shinkansen’s spotless safety record is about to go out the window. Here’s what it took to make it: the key ingredients for this summer’s craziest action-comedy high-speed journey. All aboard.

THE ASSASSINS

DAVID LEITCH HAS lost count of the number of assassins on his bullet train. “Seven?” he considers. “I’d have to count. I’d hate to get that wrong. There may be a couple of secret ones...”

Exact numbers aside, there are a lot of deadly, highly capable professional killers here. That, says Leitch, was part of the appeal. “There are a lot of storylines to navigate. But it all revolves around a simple theme of fate. All of these characters’ fates are connected.”

At the centre of it all is Brad Pitt’s Ladybug, a gun-for-hire but a gentle soul, looking to get out of the





game, but dragged into *One Last Job* by a mysterious handler. For Pitt, it was a single line of dialogue in the script that made him sign on to the role. As Ladybug goes toe-to-toe with his first adversary, he screams in confusion, "Dude, I don't even know you!" Pitt read it and "howled. Out loud. It was on that specific line that I said, 'I'm doing this.'"

Pitt was active, in fact, in reshaping the character from the brooding, misanthropic killer found in the original 2010 Japanese novel by Kōtarō Isaka, to a cheeky, bucket-hat-wearing, self-help-obsessed underdog. (The hat was Pitt's idea; "I think it was a way to hide his big star personality behind the character," producer Kelly McCormick explains.)

As soon as Ladybug steps on the train, however, he realizes he's not the only one after the briefcase. Take the delightfully

named Lemon and Tangerine, played respectively by Brian Tyree Henry and Aaron Taylor-Johnson: a pair of criminals from gangland London, who despite their physical differences are supposedly related. "The running joke is that they're twin brothers," says Henry with a smile. "But it should be that kind of chemistry. It's a backstory that's rooted in survival and love, a kind of eternal brotherly love. Even though it's, y'know, covered in blood."

For Taylor-Johnson, there was one obvious point of inspiration. "When I think of gangster twins from London, my mind instantly goes to the Krays," he says. He added details to his character that are unlikely to be seen on screen. "I felt like he was a West Ham supporter," he says. "So I wore West Ham socks every day. I had these hammer tattoos as well. I just felt like I wanted these guys to be rooted somewhere."

There's also Prince, played by Joey King, in a role that's gender-swapped from the original novel, and dials up on that, too — playing on the perceptions of an innocent-looking young woman. "She's a wild one," says King. "She gets away with a lot of stuff, because people think that she's nothing to worry about. She uses a lot of manipulation and misdirection tactics to get what she wants. Everyone thinks she's cute and sweet because she wears a lot of pink. But she is so the opposite of that."

And then there's Yuichi, played by British actor Andrew Koji, a character Leitch calls "the heartbeat of the movie". Unlike the other assassins, who have a playful quality to them, Yuichi is a "dark, troubled soul", according to Koji. "He gets on the train because he's there to find redemption. To avenge for... wrongdoing. Let's say that."

With a line-up like that — plus, Leitch promises, "a few surprises" — this is no rail replacement bus.

THE ACTION

BY NOW, YOU should know what to expect from a David Leitch film: pacy, slickly directed action, from a man who's taken the punches himself. "I got such history with Dave Leitch," says Brad Pitt. "He was my stunt double on *Fight Club*. And then on throughout the movies, into *Troy* and *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. At that point he was wanting to make this step into directing... You don't give it much credence. But he did it! He made the crossover. And he's just killing it."

The philosophy behind *87Eleven*, the action-design company founded by Leitch and fellow director Chad Stahelski, and its producing arm *87North*, is that action is the star — and the actors should get their hands dirty. Pitt did "95 per cent" of his own physical stunts on *Bullet Train*, according to stunt choreographer and second-unit director Greg Rementer — a figure that Pitt himself confirms, though with a self-deprecating shrug. "Yeah, but I'm not doing anything crazy," he says. "It's more like hand-to-hand fight scenes." There were days where he went home a little sore — he is a man approaching 60, after all — but it's an

Above, main: It's gonna be one hell of a ride... **Brad Pitt** as Ladybug and **Aaron Taylor-Johnson** as Tangerine. **Top right:** Joey King as Prince. **Left:** Hiroaki Sanada as The Elder.



occupational hazard. "You always get banged up a little bit," Pitt says. "We've padded pretty well. Some of the tougher guys go without pads. I am not that guy."

By design, *Bullet Train* is close-quarters, rough-and-ready, up-in-your-grill action. There are occasional non-train-based flashbacks, where we learn the backstories of each assassin, but for the most part, it takes place entirely aboard those 16 carriages, a claustrophobic space that doesn't necessarily lend itself to cinematic fireworks or scale. "I'm not gonna say that it was without its challenges," acknowledges Leitch. "I think there's an expectation with summer movies that you have a certain level of action and spectacle. How do you create that in this confined space? It just forces you to be creative."

Creativity is the watchword here. Alongside some more traditional punch-ups and shooting sprees, there's improvisational fighting with kettles, laptops, water bottles, and the occasional samurai sword. Every carriage on the train is different, too. "There's a quiet car," Leitch notes. "That adds a whole other flexibility to the choreography." It leads to a loopy fight scene between Pitt and Henry where they must brawl over the briefcase — while also respecting the sacred and inalienable laws of the quiet carriage. "The fact that I have a whole fight with Brad Pitt on a quiet car — that we are trying to be silent while bashing each other's faces — that was so fun to play," says Henry. "You're like a kid in a candy store."

The common thread of the action seems to be: energetic, breathless, a little silly, and fun. "It straddles a line of badass action, but with a humorous element infused in it," Pitt explains. "Almost like Jackie Chan. I feel like it is in that slipstream." Indeed, Chan's Hong Kong output set the tone for the entire endeavour. Take anything too seriously at your peril. "Jackie is always an inspiration," agrees Leitch.

THE SETTING

JAPAN WAS JUST the starting point for this action fantasy world; David Leitch — building on his work in *Atomic Blonde*, which turned Cold War-era Berlin into a grimy '80s wonderland of neon and blood — is not going for realism here. "We decided to make this a heightened reality," he explains. "It's wish-fulfillment. It's our version of Japan for this story, to give us the freedom to make something that can break rules."

That has led to the occasional accusation of whitewashing — unlike the largely Japanese characters of the novel, the film has an international cast — but the filmmakers are keen to make clear that the intention is not to reflect reality. "The movie is definitely a surreal fairy tale," says McCormick. "It's very different from the Japan of today. Everything is heightened, everything is a little bit different."

Some influences came from unexpected places: during the research process, the costume designer Sarah Evelyn found an image of a conductor trying to shove a Pokémon mascot onto a train. "We were just looking at conductors' outfits," Leitch recalls.



Above left: Andrew Keji as Yuichi Kimura.
Above: Zazie Beetz as Horriet, attempting to wrest 'the prize' from Ladybug.

"There was a whole Pokémon-themed car on one of the trains. It spoke volumes about some of the crazy things you might find on a Tokyo train." That inspired the filmmakers to create an entire anime-like character, named "Momomoto", which has its own themed train carriage, complete with full-sized mascot costume. A mascot that, at one point, Brad Pitt punches straight in the face. "That was not in the script," says McCormick. (Momomoto now has its own official TikTok channel.)

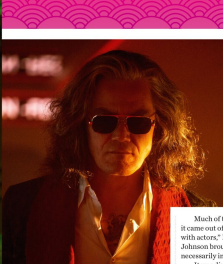
Leitch's train — complete with Momomoto carriage — was designed and built from the ground up on a soundstage in Los Angeles to Leitch's exact specifications. "He's very involved," explains Henry of the director. "He knows exactly where the blood should spatter. He's that detailed." Instead of greenscreens, a vast LED video wall recreated the rolling backdrops of Japan. It was almost too effective, recalls Pitt. "To the point where some of the crew got motion sickness," he chuckles. He loved it, though. "It was so invigorating. Soundstages can get very musty, very stale. It can feel very phoney and fake. But with this kind of technology, it was like being on a train every day."

THE COMEDY

BULLET TRAIN WAS not a comedy to begin with. The book it's adapted from is dark and suspenseful; the first screenplay, by Zak Olkewicz, played more like a thriller. But the film is as much "comedy" as it is "action": the unfinished footage screened to *Empire* features literal looks-to-camera, a *Thomas The Tank Engine* sticker book and a reference to Jaffa Cakes.

"The premise was crazy to begin with," says Leitch. "I think the humour was already in the DNA of the piece. Some of the situations are just bonkers. So you can't not have this element of comedy. We just turned it a little lighter." There is a natural farcical quality to this powder keg of assassins all jostling, in cramped conditions, for a single MacGuffin. "The humour they were able to infuse into the fight scenes — it wasn't superfluous," says Pitt. "It actually does make sense."





Much of the comedy came from the cast themselves. "I think it came out of part of the nature of working and collaborating with actors," Leitch says. "Brian Tyree Henry and Aaron Taylor-Johnson brought a lot of comedy to their roles that wasn't necessarily in there [to begin with]," adds McCormick.

It was directed like a comedy, too: many scenes were filmed with 'alts,' or alternative takes, following the Judd Apatow school of comedy where an adherence to the script is never as important as finding the funniest joke. "We would go in and do the scene from the scripts, and then there was room for improvisation," recalls Taylor-Johnson. "I've never felt that freedom before, where a director is so willing for you to experiment. Every day, I was just going to work trying to make Leitch laugh, to make Brad laugh." Henry reckons that around "80 per cent of everything that's coming out of my mouth is improv." Come for the punches, stay for the puns.

THE CAMEO

THERE IS ONE more piece to the *Bullet Train* puzzle, one secret weapon that is barely seen on screen: Sandra Bullock. She plays Maria Beetle, Ladybug's contact and handler who guides him on his mission to retrieve the briefcase in the first place. Bullock was a last-minute addition to the film after Lady Gaga dropped out, reportedly due to scheduling issues with *House Of Gucci* — and Pitt was instrumental in her casting.

"Sandy has been a great friend for many, many years, in the sense that if I ever called her up for a favour, she is there in a second," says the star. It was at a charity event in New Orleans that the pair cooked up a plan to cameo in each other's films: Bullock pops up largely in voice-over in *Bullet Train*, while Pitt returned the favour in Bullock's adventure comedy *The Lost City*. "I like this idea of cross-pollinating each other's projects — kinda like in the olden days," Pitt says.

There is even a curious bit of shared visual ephemera that they two cameos. "This is something that no-one will ever see," reveals Pitt. "She had a scar across her neck in [*Bullet Train*]. I use that same scar and put it on my neck in her film. It's a fun trade-off that only we will really be aware of." Until now, at least.

THE FUTURE

AS FOR THE fate of Ladybug, Maria and their fellow assassins, it's safe to expect more than just a few scars. The filmmakers are keeping schtum on who, exactly, gets the briefcase in the end. But if anyone actually makes it to the final station alive, could there be more carriage carnage? "We hope that we created a world that's compelling," Leitch says, carefully, "and we definitely know it's expensive. There are a lot of stories that could come out of it. We're hoping that the audience will want more." If things go to plan, more assassins could be descending on more public transport before long. Next stop: 'Bullet Plane'? ●

BULLET TRAIN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 AUGUST



Top right: Deadly duo Tangerine and Lemon (Brian Tyree Henry). Here, top to bottom: A hilarious Michael Shannon as White Death; Director David Leitch with Pitt on set; The Mommon in its own carriage; "There are plenty of empty seats elsewhere, pal."



Between them, these people's
movies have grossed over
\$4 billion.

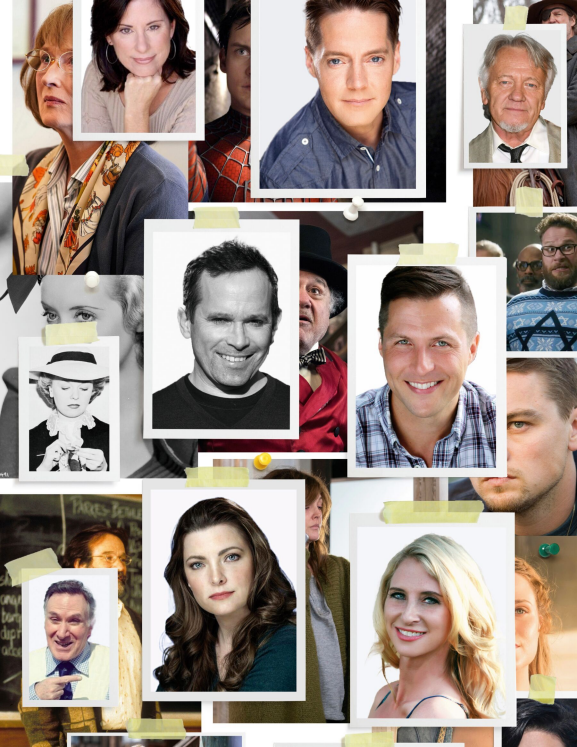
They've stood
in front of cameras for
Sam Raimi,
Martin Scorsese
and
Guillermo del Toro.

They've been on sets of
Oscar-winning films.

Yet when their work comes out,
there's **no trace**
of them to be seen...

WELCOME TO THE CURIOUS, HIGH-FLYING WORLD OF STAND-INS,
WHERE YOU CAN BECOME MERYL STREEP OR SPIDER-MAN FOR A DAY,
THEN GO HOME WITHOUT DRAWING A SECOND LOOK

WORDS AMELIA TAIT



In 1992, when Ben Hannen was a bored geography student lazing away his summer holidays,

he received a phone call that would ultimately lead him to share bathwater with Danny DeVito 25 years later. The call was from his aunt — she had heard a radio advert appealing for men of a certain height needed for an upcoming feature film. Hannen travelled to London's Mayfair and was scrutinised by a single individual in a hotel's vast function room. He got the job, and spent seven weeks on the set of 1993's *The Secret Garden*, starring Maggie Smith. But Hannen didn't appear in the finished film; his name was not listed in the credits.

Hannen, now 49, is what's known as a "stand-in", a person with a similar height, build and complexion to an actor, who literally stands in their place while the camera and lighting crew set up a shot. Unlike body doubles — whose limbs, shoulders and backs-of-heads are deliberately caught on camera — stand-ins aren't seen on screen; the role involves rehearsing, blocking, and sometimes learning actors' lines. Hannen, who is 5' 1", stood in for a young actor on *The Secret Garden* because British employment laws limit the hours that children can work (meanwhile, adult stand-ins work some of the longest hours in the industry — one says she regularly works 6pm Friday until 10am Saturday, a shift nicknamed "Fraturday").

After his star-studded summer, Hannen returned to university before going into PR. But in 2010, bored of "the bureaucracy, the general title-tattle of office life", he joined an extras agency and became the stand-in for young Snape (Benedict Clarke) in *Harry Potter And The Deathly Hallows — Part 2*. In the coming years, Hannen did stand-in gigs while also working as a precision driver for vehicles that appear on screen. Then, in 2017, he was cast as Danny DeVito's stand-in on Disney's *Dumbo*. "It was just jaw-droppingly exciting to be literally in this world of [director] Tim Burton's mind," he says.

And, yes — the role involved sitting in a hot tub while pretending to be DeVito's character, circus owner Max Medici. "To set up that scene, I was sitting in this quite cosy, warm metal bathtub with all these crew around," Hannen recalls. "And to think that I step out and then Danny's in the same bathwater as me — that sort of thing was very fun." But the job is far more than anecdote fodder; the occupational hazards are far greater than a few pruny fingertips. What's it really like to be a stand-in, part of a film's so-called "second team"? How does it feel to do so much work for so little glory?



EVER SINCE SHE was a little girl, Devon Elora wanted to be in a *Star Wars* film. After graduating with a radio and TV degree, she moved from Illinois to California and took any industry job going — as an extra, as a production assistant, at a booking agency. That's where, one day in 2007, Elora got a call from a casting director seeking a 5' 7" blonde to stand-in on the HBO drama *Big Love*. Then came the words that made her career: "What about you?"

LA-based Elora, now 42, has spent the last 15 years standing in, and while she hasn't yet been in a *Star Wars* film, she worked on *The Mandalorian* in 2019. "I did a scene where the actress comes onto the ship, and she kicks a bunch of stormtroopers' butts," Elora says. "I was so proud of myself, I memorised every single job, every single kick. I had the whole thing down." Afterwards, she was so happy that she burst into tears.

Stand-in work often requires such choreography. A stand-in often begins their day watching actors rehearse — they'll take notes on where their actor moves so that when they leave for hair and make-up, the stand-in can recreate the routine. (Sometimes, things operate differently: Tim Burton, for example, disliked the second team watching rehearsals because he desired privacy; Hannen had to find "little secret hiding places" so he could watch.) The blocking stand-ins learn is occasionally elaborate, but other times, the job is literally about standing still.



"I've heard of stand-ins locking their knees and fainting," Elora says. Once, to prepare for a scene where one character straddled another in a shower, Elora stood on an apple box and remained face-to-face with a male stand-in for an uncomfortably long time. On a similar occasion, she sat face-to-face with a stand-in on *Westworld*, "and they asked my partner to leave so the real actor could come in." It was Anthony Hopkins. He said she could call him Tony. Elora was so nervous to be nose-to-nose with a knight that she felt she would throw up.

Are A-listers always this "just-call-me-Tony"? "You have to kind of feel out your actor and what they prefer," Elora says — sometimes





(Clockwise from far left) Stand-in and deliver — Ben Hansen with Danny DeVito on the set of *Dumbo*; Drew Barrymore with Drew Barrymore in 2020's *The Stand-In*; DeVito (with Colin Farrell) reads himself for his *Dumbo* bathtub showdown with Hansen; Reese Witherspoon (in *Big Little Lies*) — “totally normal” says stand-in Kyle Humphrey; “Just call me Tony” — Anthony Hopkins, doing his unintentional best to break out the stand-ins; Humphrey on set with Meryl Streep.



stand-ins give notes to their actors directly (“Like, ‘Hey, don’t trip on that lamp. I almost did,’” Elora says), while other times a cool distance is maintained. Elora says Aaron Paul was so friendly (on *Big Love*) that she assumed he was an extra. “As stand-ins, one of the things that’s appreciated more than anything else is being treated equally,” she says. Though stand-ins get paid more than background actors, around \$214 (£164) for eight hours, their names — like extras — are often absent from credits.

Kyle Humphrey has 15 years’ experience standing in on shows such as *Mad Men* and comedy-drama *GLOW* (she’s the one who regularly works *Fraturdays*). LA-based Humphrey says Meryl Streep is “extremely easy to talk to”; Reese Witherspoon is “totally normal”; and Jon Hamm once shook off his security to meet Humphrey’s friend, a big fan. “There are other shows, though, where the stars aren’t so nice, or they have major attitudes.”

Elora has “heard of stand-ins who’ve been ripped apart by their actors; like, made fun of.” She begins telling a story about an actor who misheard her and “he came over to my chair and...” She stops herself. “You know what, never mind.” Discretion is a key part of the job.

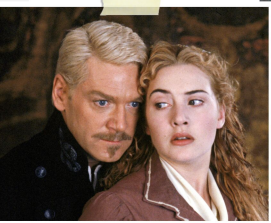
Proximity to stardom might motivate some stand-ins. Their work is so unknown that they’re almost absent from pop culture — though in 2020, *Peep Show* writer Sam Bain released *The Stand-In*,

a comedy film where Drew Barrymore plays an actor and the stand-in who steals her identity (in truth, the stand-in is more of a body double).

“I think what fascinated me was the status issues,” Bain says. “It could be very exciting to be part of a film — if you’re a certain person, you just love every minute of it. Or it could be enormously frustrating, and you are envious every minute of it, of the person who gets to act.” For many stand-ins, though, there’s a lot more to it than secretly wishing for a starring role.

BROOKE CARRELL WAS the stand-in for the titular stand-in on the movie *The Stand-In*. “I was very scared, and I just didn’t want to get fired,” she recalls of her debut stand-in gig. “Or, you know, cry” (neither she nor Humphrey wanted to disclose their age due to ageism in the entertainment world). “But for me, it sparked even more of a love for the film and television industry.” (Drew Barrymore, incidentally, worked Method on *The Stand-In*. When she was dressed as the actor character Candy, she was pleasant to Carrell; when she was playing Candy’s stand-in, Paula, she was stand-offish. Barrymore finally explained the wrap party: “She said Paula hated me because Paula thought I was trying to take her job,” Carrell laughs.)

New Jersey-based Carrell has almost



always wanted to act, but she worked in the corporate world and had three sons before taking the plunge — now she works as a stand-in while also pursuing acting work. Does she see the with jealousy while standing in? No, it's an opportunity to learn how sets operate. "Getting into this business later, I felt like it was a disadvantage. So when I do stand-in, I learn a lot," she says.

There are enticing opportunities. Bain's close friend's "first job out of drama school" was as Kenneth Branagh's stand-in on 1996's *Hamlet*: "It was a huge sea of Hollywood talent... and he got to act *Hamlet* with all of those people," says Bain. Sometimes, there's a chance to contribute creatively — Carlo Fiore, Marlon Brando's *On The Waterfront* stand-in, claimed he helped Brando master his disappointed reaction to his character's brother holding a gun to his chest.

Yet many stand-ins don't want to act — they dislike the spotlight, despite spending their time preparing it for others. A number of stand-ins declined to be interviewed for this piece, describing themselves as private. "I'm not bothered about being on screen, I have never wanted to be famous," Elora herself says. What motivates her? "It's the perfect job for me because I love lifting others up. With standing in, I can help my actor and help set up the shots for them, so they get lit better and they do a better job." Then there are more mundane motivations — numerous stand-ins said health insurance and pensions are more stable than a jobbing actor constantly seeking work.

Elora is so dedicated that she brings eight different wigs and multiple pairs of heels to set. That way if the crew need a stand-in for a different actor in a pinch, she's ready (she recently wore her black wig to stand-in for Courteney Cox). Dedicated stand-ins are sometimes rewarded with small cameos (when filming 2008 drama *Cut City* in the 48°C Californian desert heat, Humphrey

Above: Nice work if you can get it — one rookie's first job out of drama school was as the stand-in for Kenneth Branagh (pictured with Kate Winslet) in 1996's *Hamlet*. **Below:** Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Departed* — Ben Hauck stood-in for Leo in the 2006 crime thriller.



worked so hard that producers wrote her a role as a "hotel hostess") — and if they're especially good at their job, the actor they're working with might handpick them to be their full-time stand-in.

Lloyd Catlett has stood in for Jeff Bridges for more than 50 years; Bridges has even thanked him during award-show acceptance speeches. "I spoke to a producer I knew who hired Jeff, and one of the first things the agent said was, 'Take care of Lloyd' — Lloyd was part of the package," Bain says.

Chad Cleven has stood in for Tobey Maguire since 2003. He recalls attending a callout for 5' 7.5" men, and "standing shoulder to shoulder" with extras of all different heights, who unflinchingly declared they were 5' 7.5", one by one. "When it got me to me, I was chuckling, and I just said my real size — 5' 7," Cleven says — he got the gig, on sports drama *Seabiscuit*, and Maguire requested him for *Spider-Man 2* and *3*.

"It's always great when an actor keeps on requesting you or even puts you in their contracts — you don't have to worry so much about finding work," Cleven says ("except", of course, "when the actor you stand-in for isn't working"). Strong bonds can form. Adam Bryant was Robin Williams' contracted stand-in for 25 years. It's rumored that when Bette Davis left Warner Bros., she negotiated for her stand-in Sally Sage to continue to work at the studio.



Left: Tobey Maguire with Chad Cleven, on location for *Spider-Man 3*. Below, from top: Robin Williams in *The Crazy Ones* — Adam Bryant was his stand-in for 25 years; Kyle Humphrey worked regularly on *Mad Men*; Jeff Bridges with Lloyd Catelet; The ultimate pro for any stand-in — getting to wear THE suit!



Cleven has fond memories of the *Spider-Man* sets — partly because, yes, he got to wear the suit. “An element that made this gig extra special was meeting the fans and kids,” he says. “I remember walking to a subway in NYC after filming and I hear a little girl’s voice screaming, ‘Peter Parker!’ I turned around and she was running to me with open arms and gave me a huge hug.”

When the job’s good, it’s very good — but what about when it’s bad?

FOLLOWING HIS *DUMBO* gig, Ben Hannen was thrown from Danny DeVito’s bathroom to the top of a windy lighthouse as part of Kenneth Branagh’s 2020 film *Artemis Fowl*. “One of the things I don’t like is heights, and I was up on this little perimeter balcony with a gale-force wind blowing,” he says. Though he recalls the scene jokingly, the safety of stand-ins is not always a priority. “I’ve been on a set where

they actually tested fire around me without telling me,” Elora says — she had her hands tied behind her back at the time. Once, she was asked to smash prop glass without eye-protection; another time, she was asked to run across a roof.

Ben Hauck, a 47-year-old stand-in (he got his break standing in for Leonardo DiCaprio in Martin Scorsese’s 2006 crime drama *The Departed*), and who runs the blog *Stand-In Central*, says “handling” is also a big problem. “It basically means laying your hands on a stand-in without their permission and moving them, almost as if they’re a prop,” Hauck says. “Stand-ins are not props. They’re human beings.”

New York-based Hauck says he has felt “violated” while being handled — and when it comes to intimate scenes, things can become even more problematic. In 2021, *Six And The City* stand-in Heather Kristin wrote an article for *The Independent* in which she recalled lying on a gynaecologist’s table for a particular scene with her legs spread — she fell asleep and her feet were duct-taped to the stirrups. The crew took photos and laughed.

Even without handling or harassment, standing in can be draining. “One thing that directors or camera operators will do is have us be in a very awkward position for a long amount of time and without even thinking about how awkward it is for us,” Elora says.

Stand-ins must be extremely attentive, always ready and listening, often among the first on set. And with 16-hour days not uncommon, most say their personal lives suffer. Hauck loves his work — he enjoys being in studios and around creative people — but says it can be frustrating to “put my blood, sweat and tears into a job” and then not be listed in the final credits.

Thankfully, once a year during awards season, stand-ins get the recognition they deserve. They dress up in their finest and walk down the red carpet into a small black-box theatre for the Los Angeles Union Background Actors Awards, affectionately nicknamed “The Blurries”. Background actor Vincent Amaya, who has run the awards for four years, says, “I wanted to prove that we are professionals. There are good people out there, and we wanted to celebrate them.”

Every year, the judging committee select a best male and female stand-in, among a number of other categories; Amaya says they’re chosen based on the complexity of the job they did, or because of their sheer dedication. Humphrey won in 2022, Elora won in 2021.

“It feels really good to be noticed,” Elora says — a smooth golden statue sits atop her fireplace, its fists determinedly balled on its chest. “I’m proud of it because I do work my butt off. It’s nice to have an award that says someone cares about the work that you do.” Most of today’s beloved movies could never have been made without someone like Elora — stoic, silent stand-ins who occasionally, just occasionally, get the opportunity to stand out. ●



IT'S ALIVE!

HE'S THE STOP-MOTION GENIUS BEHIND SOME OF YOUR FAVOURITE CINEMATIC CREATURES – BUT FOR **PHIL TIPPETT**, IT'S ALL BEEN LEADING TO **MAD GOD**, A PASSION-PROJECT DECADES IN THE MAKING. EXCLUSIVELY FOR *EMPIRE*, HE EXPLAINS WHY THIS IS HIS GREATEST CREATION

WORDS PHIL TIPPETT





MY VERY FIRST memory of being alive was a dream. In the dream I was in a crib, with bars on it. (I was that young.) I had a nightlight in my room. The door was open, and I could see out in the hallway — and then this slurry, four-foot-long, black octopus thing came into the room and slithered across the floor. I just watched as it put its tentacles up on the bars and plopped over into the crib. That was the dream. I couldn't have been older than two years old.

Later, when I was maybe about eight, I had a dream where I saw this huge monster, out in the back yard: just a black shape, about eight feet tall. It was standing there, staring at me, putting the fear of God into me, and I knew immediately its intentions were very malevolent. The thing was going to devour me. I realized that I had to do something, otherwise I would be destroyed. What came to me was that I must, somehow, be worse than the demon: so within myself, I conjured something, and attacked the thing, screaming. Then I woke up.

I'm guided by my dreams a lot. Dreams have always kind of followed me — or I followed them. But I have no idea why I have always been fascinated by monsters. My earliest drawings were always of things that inspired me: giant squids, hard-hat deep-sea divers, knights... There was a lot of blood and mayhem in my drawings. I just found it all very exciting.

I was a prolific dreamer while working on *Mad God*, my feature film. Every night I would have dreams, and I would write the dreams down, in a good-sized notebook. Sometimes it'd be as much as six pages at a time. After doing that for a few months, I was able to discern a structure to the dreams. If you talk about your dream at the breakfast table, it just evaporates — but in writing them down, I found a beginning, middle and end. It's a Joseph Campbell deal: story narrative is innate within us.

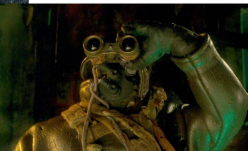
Mad God certainly has a unique structure to it, but it too has a beginning, middle and an end. (Even though it sometimes might seem like all three of them, all at the same time, depending on what part you're looking at.)

It is the culmination of my life's work. It's the whole enchilada for me. It was quite a journey. One that I would never repeat.

THE CHRONOLOGY of what led to *Mad God* really began in 1956. When I was five years old, I saw *Kluge Koyu* on TV. It was magic. Later, when I was about seven, the stop-motion animation and visual-effects legend Ray Harryhausen was a huge illumination for me. My dad, who was an artist, saw that I was into monsters and weird stuff. He

Clockwise from

main: The genius at work — the director puts his stamp on *Mad God*; A particularly LSD-style creation; Nightmarish staring doll? Check; Nightmarish red-eyed, net-faced monster thing? Check; Tippett putting the finishing touches to one of his stop-motion models; The Assassin (Hane Brekke), rocking steam-punk chic; Tea-taking, card-playing larvae — but of course!





showed me art by macabre, nightmarish painters like Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel. Looking back on it, that was kind of the kernel, the seed from which everything grew; unconsciously, I always wanted to make a Hieronymus Bosch movie. I just didn't know it yet.

In the '60s, when I was a teenager, Bob Dylan shifted away from folk and started doing his more poetic, surrealistic songs and poems, and that was a huge influence. I was interested in surrealism and how that was inspired by Freud and Jung and the unconscious. Then, of course, I started seriously studying cinema in my late teens, early twenties. I'd always been a big fan of movies, but that was when I really started to probe it.

With *Kong*, I got interested in palaeontology.

That led to paleontology and anthropology. I began studying everything that I could, from religion to the history of art and architecture. I was just like a sponge.

In the 1970s, I had gotten a job making props for Cascade Pictures, a huge commercial house in Hollywood. That's where I met budding visual-effects artists like Dennis Muren, Jon Berg and Ken Ralston. There weren't that many people interested in visual effects or animation at the time — we all somehow gravitated there. Then Dennis, Ken and I got a gig working on the holocaust scene for *Star Wars* — and one thing led to another.

ADAM SAVAGE [SPECIAL-effects designer and *MythBusters* presenter] once told me that, if asked the question, "What was the most significant event in your life?", many people would reply, "Having children, and taking LSD." I would really agree with that.

I took LSD around the time I was working on

Return Of The Jedi. I think I was just bored. I took way too much. I thought I could project thought plasma to photographs or objects, and understand their consciousness. Then my cat, Brian, took me to the centre of the Earth, where we stayed for billions of years. (My wife was sleeping at the time; she later told me she could hear pots and pans hanging.) But it was really calming. It was like the snow that's on TV at four o'clock in the morning. I really enjoyed it.

I took acid on a Friday, and when I went back to work on the Monday, I walked into the huge soundstage where they were shooting the skills for *Return Of The Jedi*. The big bluescreens just scrambled my brain. So I drove home. To this day, there's a freeway sign near where I live in Berkeley, California, that I still occasionally see trails on. The effect of this stuff is very material and powerful. It definitely influenced me indirectly, if not directly.

After *Return Of The Jedi*, I took about a year off to set up my own studio — to begin



with, literally just in my garage — and made a dinosaur short film called *Prehistoric Beasts*. I always wanted to make a dinosaur film, and I thought I was just getting it out of my system. I didn't realise at the time, but I was ahead of the curve with all the dinosaur stuff. I kept getting dinosaur gigs, which all culminated, in the early '90s, with *Jurassic Park*. When Steven Spielberg needed a dinosaur supervisor, he asked George Lucas; George said, "Phil's your guy." I understood the filmmaking process, and I was also, essentially, an amateur paleontologist. Steven was very adamant about making the dinosaurs appear as real animals, not as monsters, so I knew what to do.

The experience was very hard for me, though. The dinosaur effects were originally planned to be completed in stop-motion animation. Dennis Muren had been doing some tests at ILM and produced this test footage with a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, to prove that they could do it in CGI. We watched the test footage — and I just saw my whole world dissolving in front of me. Steven's a really thoughtful and caring guy. He knew this was tough for me. He asked me how I felt. I said, "I've just become extinct." (He used that line in the movie.)

It was a hard blow for me. I got pneumonia and had to stay in bed for a couple of weeks. I just thought that it was the end of everything that I worked for. I was over-emotional, moving through a stage of my life where I had to let one part of me that I really loved go, and into this next zone.

The digital revolution changed everything for me. Hollywood was everything I aspired to for as long as I could remember. When I started out, it was still old-school Hollywood; the buildings hadn't changed since the '30s; they were still using the old technology like stop-motion and Mitchell cameras. It was like being in a time machine. I'm really glad that I was able to participate in that bubble of time.

IT WAS WHILE working as an animator on the 1985 CBS television special *Dinosaur!*, with Christopher Reeve as the narrator, that I first started thinking seriously about what would become *Mad God*.

I actually built the costume for The Assassin, *Mad God*'s lead character, around that time, though it changed significantly over the years. In 1990, after working on animation sequences for *RoboCop 2*, I had some of the members of that crew help me shoot about three minutes of material for *Mad God*. (That footage is in the final cut of the film.) But I soon realised the scope of it was too big. I didn't really think I would ever be able to make it. I never really let it go; it was like a ghost in my consciousness. I looked at it as a failed experiment. Over the next 20 years, I did occasional storyboards and designs in-between jobs, in the evenings or whenever I had days off. I just couldn't let go of it. I didn't really have any say in the matter, either. I was just kind of transcribing it.

Around 20 years after filming those first three minutes, I was archiving the footage, when some of the guys at my animation and visual-



effects company, Tippet Studio, were looking over my shoulder. They thought it was some lost Czechoslovakian film or something. They were computer artists, but inspired by the making of movies like *RoboCop* and *Star Wars*, they were keen to work with models and lights on sets, an era that had kind of evaporated in the digital age. A couple of guys asked if they could do a shot. I had to go back and refurbish the main character, The Assassin, which had almost disintegrated — and then they did a shot.

It snowballed from there. I auctioned off a bunch of props from movies I'd worked on over the years to raise some money. I did some Kickstarters to get the thing going again; some people gave me some money to complete it. I gave talks in the Bay Area to college students and high-school students, and from that, people started to volunteer. They

This page, top to bottom: *Repo* Alan director Alex Cox as *Mad God*'s Last Man; The Assassin, deadly suitcase in hand; And again, roaming in the gloaming.





Left: Tippett, engaged in his highly intricate model-work.
Above: That's going to sting a bit.

It was during filming that I first found out about Carl Jung's *The Red Book*. What he was going through with that was almost identical to what I went through. Jung goes down a path in the book where you enter these journeys and you don't know where the path is going to lead. It leads to another path, which leads to another path, which leads to a door... It really is the hero's journey structure, where you set off in search of the Holy Grail, for lack of a better term, and you just get lost. Jung kind of popped his cork. It drove him mad. His family were able to pull him back. But he got lost. And I got lost.

This thing consumed me. I got so involved that there was nothing else in my life. I just started to disintegrate and look like a homeless person. I was all banged up from working in the shop. I was aware of this, and my friends and people that were close to me realised too. But I popped my cork. Eventually, I ended up in the psych ward for a few days, and it took me months to recover from that towards the end. That journey was really quite profound.

WHEN *MAD GOD* ended, two things happened. I stopped dreaming. And I stopped making things with my hands. I'd been making things with

my hands all my life — and all of a sudden that just evaporated. I simply didn't want to anymore.

Samuel Beckett once said, "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now." So I started writing. I'm pursuing an expedition into graphic novels. I just transcribe it and work from the unconscious. I've also been working on a kind of sequel to *Mad God* that I want to do — but it's nothing like *Mad God*. I'm never gonna make anything like *Mad God* again.

I've put *Mad God* behind me. It's not mine anymore. It's everybody's. Or, at least, everybody who wants to watch it. Now, it feels like somebody else made that film. The experience really was like a dream. ●

MAD GOD IS ON DVD AND BLU-RAY FROM 16 JULY

MONSTER MAGIC

Four great Tippett creations



AT-AT

The Empire Strikes Back (1981)

After delivering the movie-stealing holochess game in *A New Hope*, Tippett was a shoe-in to create the All Terrain Armored Transport (AT-AT), the Imperial mode of transport on Hoth. He imbued the mechanical behemoths with both menace and personality.



VERMITHRAX PEJORATIVE

Dragonslayer (1981)

Tippett created the walking version of the dragon for Matthew Robbins' sword-and-sorcery flick, inventing a whole new mode of animation, 'go motion', into the bargain. The result is one of Guillermo del Toro's favourite creature designs, and the greatest dragon ever put on film (sorry, Smaug).



ED-209

RoboCop (1987)

RoboCop's ED-209 saw Tippett return to traditional stop-motion animation to create a relentless killing machine that could take on the cyborg policeman, his work featuring in 55 shots. A brutal, hulking robot, you have 15 seconds to comply with its genius.



VELOCIRAPTORS

Jurassic Park (1993)

Even if Tippett's stop-motion techniques were rendered extinct by CGI, *Jurassic Park* greatly benefited from his instincts for animal movement and behaviour. ILM created a DID (Dinosaur Input Device), allowing him to work in the CG space as he would in animation. Watch how the raptors interact with each other as they enter the kitchen. Pure, unfiltered Tippett. **IAN FREER**

would come to my studio on a Saturday, around a half-a-dozen people at a time, and on a Sunday I would figure out the process for the following week. A lot of these people had never worked with their hands in this way before.

It was a slow, labour-intensive process. There's one scene where *The Assassin* is in his car, driving through mountains of dead soldiers. That set alone took around a half-a-dozen people over three years to make. All this stuff takes time, which is very antithetical to the normal production process in filmmaking. Nobody really understood the process; even I didn't, entirely. It was like the parable about the blind men trying to figure out what an elephant is, each describing a different part of the body. It was that. I just took my time.

NEVER REALLY WORKED from intention on *Mad God*. There's an interview with Picasso, where the interviewer was asking the artist what he was looking for in his work. Picasso's answer: "I do not seek, I find." That's what you find with almost all artists: they get an idea or concept and then it takes days, weeks, months, years to figure out what it is, how to turn it into something.

Over time, the whole process of making the film turned into a very biblical journey for me. The film, in fact, opens with an extract from the Book of Leviticus — "You shall become a desolation, and your cities a ruin..." I used the version from the Torah, which is almost identical to the Bible, but it's a little bit meaner.



BURTON

WITH **BATMAN RETURNS**, TIM BURTON GAVE THE WORLD A SEQUEL THAT ASTONISHED, DELIGHTED AND SHOCKED IN EQUAL MEASURE. NOW, 30 YEARS LATER, THE DIRECTOR SITS DOWN WITH *EMPIRE* TO REVISIT A TRULY SINGULAR SUPERHERO OUTING

RETURNS

WORDS ALEX GODFREY



PORTRAITS STEVE SCHOFIELD
DIGITAL NADINE JACEY

Tim Burton, photographed
exclusively for *Empire* in
London on 18 May 2022.





TIM BURTON

strides down the staircase of his London home, reassuringly dressed head-to-toe in black, save for a pair of black-and-white stripy socks (can you describe them as Burton-esque if they're worn by the *actual* Tim Burton?). He greets *Empire* warmly, happy to reminisce about *Batman Returns* — ostensibly a superhero film, but absolutely a Tim Burton film.

His first instalment, 1989's brooding *Batman*, was a massive hit, changing the blockbuster landscape forever, paving the way for an entire industry. With so much riding on it, though, and with many other voices involved, it was a somewhat difficult experience for Burton, who then went off to make his passion project *Edward Scissorhands*. Yet inevitably talk soon turned to a *Batman* sequel and, with the promise of increased creative control, he decided to come back for more.

Batman Returns, written by *Heathers* hotshot Daniel Waters (and later taken to the finish line by Wesley Strick), was a glorious, twisted, magical labour of love that deployed Gotham City as its playground, with Burton free to indulge his most fantastical whims.

This time, *Batman* (once again Michael Keaton, once again cool as you like) would face a magnificent menagerie of villains: Michelle Pfeiffer's damaged, unpredictable Catwoman, Danny DeVito's drooling Penguin, and Christopher Walken's corrupt Max Shreck. The result was a unique vision that hasn't dated a jot — even if its more subversive excesses did upset some audience members at the time, leading to a lesser box-office and a change in direction from Warner Bros., who would then hire Joel Schumacher to take the series to less upsetting, less inspired places.

Three decades on, Burton is ready to tell *Empire* the full story, frequently with a giggle. Afterwards, he leads us into a room housing a pinball machine tied to the 1989 film. "They didn't make one for *Batman Returns*," he chuckles. As he explains, this one wasn't exactly engineered to be fun for all the family...

***Batman* was an enormous success. Do you think a sequel was always expected?**
No, I don't think so. It was interesting, because those were the days before... "Franchise"; you'd never heard that term before. There





Clockwise from top left: Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) and Batman (Michael Keaton) get acquainted; Christopher Walken as Max Shreck; Nice motor; Danny DeVito as The Penguin — with rubber-duck boat; Broody Bruce in the Batcave; Director Tim Burton with Keaton and Pfeiffer on set.

were franchises, but that word wasn't used, and people didn't think that way, quite as they do now. A few years later, you'd hear the word "tentpole". They use these circus terms for that franchise mentality, which is, obviously, where we're at. I never heard the word "franchise" on *Batman*. On the second one, I started to hear that word for the first time.

I'd heard that you weren't automatically up for doing a sequel.
Yeah, that's true.

Is that because you had a tough time on the first one?

Yeah, I was a bit traumatised. All filmmaking is traumatic. I never did anything to make a big... you know, I just did things that I wanted to do. But I love *Batman*, I loved doing it, I love



the character. That's why I wanted to do it. I like that *Phantom Of The Opera* thing. So, it wasn't like I had a bad experience; I was always interested.

Is it right that they gave you carte blanche on *Batman Returns* and said that you could do what you wanted with it?

No, I don't think they ever said *that*. But that's what kind of happened. There was definitely more freedom, in a certain way. There's never freedom on a big film, but it was a different energy that way, definitely.

Do you remember your first thoughts about what you might want to do with it?

Well, it's just those weird little books that hook you into it. I like the psychology of *Batman*. And *Penguin* and *Catwoman*, these animal people. For me, *Batman* is more rooted in a horror-movie kind of mythology. The idea of animal people, instincts of humans and animals. It's just weird things that inspired me... bat, cat, penguin...

You told Daniel Waters to write the screenplay as if the first film didn't exist, and it's a very self-contained sort of fantasy land, from that script to the sets, the miniatures, the costumes, everything. Expressionist movies, those old horror movies that you don't really know where they take place — that's something that I grew up liking in all those old movies, and it's something that I felt glad to be able to do. And to do it on this kind of level was amazing.

How did you want to develop *Batman* as a character from the first film?

Well... you can't go very far. Even little things: he unmasked himself, and you piss people off. And it's like, "Well, wait a minute, that's what it's all about, it's about a dual personality. It's night and day. Two sides of the same thing." He didn't really change that much in a sense. I think it was just more giving him the circumstances of dealing with *Catwoman* and those kinds of things that broadened it out.

What's especially great about *Catwoman* is her unpredictability. She's not a, quote

unquote, strong female character. She doesn't quite know what she is herself.

Yeah, and that's why I love that character. That's my favourite character. And that's what Michelle did such a beautiful job with. To me, it's a strong character, it's not about being a strong woman. And I love that about her. With Michael and her and all of them, they're like silent-movie actors. Michelle, she did things that I was so amazed and impressed by. She truly was that character, her unpredictability and her vulnerability and her psychology — everything all in one.

You had Annette Bening cast as *Catwoman* first, but then she became pregnant. How far along were you, in working with her? I spoke to her, and we did a little bit, yes. Not much. And then, it was a surprise. But that's life. And things always have a way of working out somehow.

Had you known Michelle's work? Did she have to audition?

No, she didn't. I didn't know her work a lot, but I'd seen *Scaryface*, I knew who she was. And right away... I met her and she was so great.

It seems she was game for everything. She was walking around on those heels on rooftops. I mean, she did all that stuff! Incredible. And that just gets everybody so revved up. She whipped, she... you know, she held a bird in her mouth for, like, 20 seconds and then let it fly out.

Did you ask her to do that?

Yeah. [*Laughs*] I like asking people to do funny things.

Some people would say, "No, I'm not putting a bird in my mouth."

But then that wouldn't have happened. And then physically, she'd do things like... When the cats are attacking her... Have you ever had a bunch of cats come up and start biting you? It's some scary shit [*laughs*]. So she's lying there and cats are picking at her and then she opens her eyes like a zombie. With some people, you'd have to do an effect, but she just did it on her own. So she was like, 100 per cent.



Danny DeVito was game, too. Daniel Waters said that he originally wrote the Penguin in Danny's voice, but then he read it and asked for it to be much weirder.

Yeah, Danny is so game. Jack [Nicholson] did it with Joker too: when people get into certain make-up, they become something else, which goes back to Lon Chaney and all those great things that are exciting to see. Just kind of becoming some weird creature.

You suggest on your DVD commentary that the studio did not love the black goo coming out of Penguin's mouth. What were those conversations?

They kept making comments like, "What's that stuff coming out of his mouth?" And I tried to describe it, I tried to give them creative things, I tried to give them medical things, I tried to give them [laughs] case studies. Whatever. But to be fair, big studio, and they're letting me do this. We had all these live penguins, and they're like, "What the fuck's going on around here?"

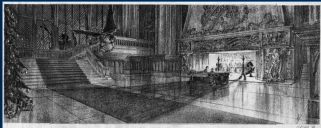
Legend has it that Danny stayed in character on set. Michelle Pfeiffer said that if she looked over at him he'd just grunt at her. Was he always like that? Pretty much. People would walk by him in the make-up chair and he'd try to bite them. But you know, seriously, you're sitting there for fucking eight hours and you're looking at yourself turning into this giant slug. It's gonna be hard not to, in a funny way.

He is so lascivious and lecherous as the Penguin. It's kind of shocking, watching it today.

I know. He's like a weird creature pervert... yeah. It's not very politically correct. But he was a complete character that way.

Let's talk about the film's sexuality. It's pretty full-on. That hasn't been done in any other superhero film before or since, not like that.

[Laughs] Well, you go back to the first one, there's a certain perversity in *Batman*. A kind of weird sexual thing just by looking at it. The original costume-makers worked in the fetish industry. It's not that that's what



Clockwise from top left: The infamous rocket-armed penguins; Sketches of The Penguin (by Tim Burton) and Wayne Manor's interior (by Martin A. Kline); Keaton and Burton on set.



it was about, but it's kind of there. And then you throw in Catwoman, and it just gets a bit more...

Daniel Waters has talked about the "kinky shit" in the film. He said that in terms of that, what people might think were bits of subtext were just actual text to you.

It's true! To some degree. It's just what it sort of is. So to me, it was just natural, all that stuff.

Christopher Walken's Max Shreck was a new character. What was it that was exciting to you about him? Was it what you were exploring politically?

Well, yeah, and also just about perception.

It goes back to monsters. How the monsters are always misperceived. The Penguin and Catwoman are perceived as the villains, but he's the face of what is normal in society, and business and power. Yeah, it is a sort of a comment on that. He's the real villain. These others are perceived as that, but they're just animal people really.

Talking of animals... you had lots of magnificent penguins in this film.

[Laughs] Now, you wouldn't do it, you'd just go CG. You couldn't do it and you wouldn't do it. We had to have giant air conditioners for them. All the sets had to be kept below 35 degrees, all the time. It's like Method. It's a surreal memory to me, having all these penguins in Burbank.





Do you remember when you first thought of having rockets strapped to penguins? I just did some drawings, little sketches. There was just something funny about, you know, rockets on... I just liked it, basically!

There was a *Rolling Stone* interview with you conducted during post-production, and while preparing the film to show to the studio execs, you said you'd rather show it to aliens.

[Laughs] I think that was a comment about how I felt. When you're making something, and I don't like to be like this, but you always feel this adversarial thing. The artists versus the businessmen, the 'this' versus the 'that'. I'm very grateful and I got through all of this stuff with them and it was good; there's a lot of things along the way that just make you feel like you're talking to aliens, and I'm sure they feel the same about me!

How did you go about navigating all of those things, the talks with merchandising companies and the likes

of McDonald's?

They didn't like the stuff coming out of Penguin's mouth... I remember I said, "What's that coming out of his mouth?" Okay, what's in your hamburgers? What the fuck's going on there? [I] tell you what's in there, you tell me what's... Come on, seriously.

So you literally had meetings yourself with these companies?

Yeah. Oh yeah. Because, first of all — and I've constantly been through this, and with every movie it's a struggle — if they're gonna make something, I love toys. I've got a big, giant toy collection. I'm a good judge of it. I've done this stuff, I know what's up. But yeah, it's another moving trade.

Is it true that McDonald's called off a Happy Meal tie-in after seeing the film? I think so. That's what I'm saying, it was like, "What's that black stuff coming out? Kids are gonna go off their Happy Meals." Happy Meal sales would be down by 30 per cent.





Clockwise from top left: Burton's illustrations of Catwoman; Burton's Polaroids of Pfeiffer (and friends) on set, an extremely dead Max Shreck, DeVito's monocled Penguin, and the director himself in front of a Shreck family portrait; Burton's painting of the Penguin with his trusty foot soldiers.

So yes, I think so. You know, it's not something that devastated me. It won't be one of my last dying memories, that McDonald's cancelled their promotion.

Did you see the footage that went viral recently, from a 1992 TV talk show? They had a ten-year-old kid, *USA Today's* junior movie critic. Did you see this?

No.
This kid was very upset with the film. [Burton claps with joy]. He's going, "It

was very violent. It was a total attack against kids. I've never been scared of a movie like this before. It's just not fair to kids. Penguin always had goo coming out of his mouth. Catwoman plays Tic-Tac-Toe on a man's face."

[Laughs uproariously] I love it. I remember one guy reviewed *Beetlejuice* and he hated it. Everything he said was like that. But it made everybody want to go see it! [Laughs]

Batman Returns is dark, but in such a fun way. And it certainly doesn't seem that dark now. It's actually kind of joyful and delightful.

Well, I'm not just overly dark. That represents me in the sense that... that's how I see things. When I watch those old movies, there's joy, there's light in the dark. It's not meant as pure darkness. There's a mixture.

How far did you get into thinking about or talking about a third film?
I'll never forget it — I went in to see [execs]

Bob Daly and Terry Semel at Warner Bros. We had a long meeting, and I started pitching ideas. And they kept saying, "Are you sure you want to do this? Don't you want to do a movie like *Edward Scissorhands*?" And halfway through the meeting, I said, "Wait a minute, you guys. I feel like you really don't want me to do another one, do you?" And they go, "No, no, no," but I truly felt that. And I think that was true. My feeling was that the film didn't do as well [as the first one] and it confused people a little bit. It doesn't follow, you know, the way things go. And in the birth of the franchise era... I think they wanted to go a different way.

I get the impression that Michael Keaton wouldn't have done another without you.
I don't think so. We used to joke that he'd be like Elvis — he'd be opening supermarkets in 20 years as Batman.

Isn't it interesting how things come around, though? He's said that he talked

Tim Burton
surrounded by the
original rocket-
wielding penguins
from *Batman Returns*
(many thanks
to Propstore).





Top to bottom: Michael Keaton breaks into Strick's department store; fighting crime and injustice; Burton with DeVito on set.



with the studio about a third film, and they were saying, "Why does it have to be so dark? Why does Batman have to be so depressed?" That's interesting in relation to what they're doing now, because now Batman is *really* depressed.

I know! But [back then] they went the other way. That's the funny thing about it. But then I was like, "Wait a minute. Okay. Hold on a second here. You complain about me, I'm too weird, I'm too dark, and then you put nipples on the costume? Go fuck yourself." Seriously. So yeah, I think that's why I didn't end up... I don't know how much I pitched them. I think it was more the idea of me doing *anything* [laughs].

What's it like for you to see that they're doing these big Batman films now, continuing from what you started off... and there's this very dark one now with Batman and Catwoman and Penguin in it. I haven't seen it. I'd like to see it.

Is it strange, though, to see what's come in the wake of what you started? Look, given who I am, it was good, because it felt new at the time. So for me, that was great. And it's funny to see this now, because all these memories come back of, "It's too dark." So, it makes me laugh a little bit.

At the time, you wanted to make a Catwoman spin-off film. How along the

line were you with developing that?

Well, I loved that character. But... Once you upset McDonald's, it's all over with. [Cracks up]

I know that Daniel Waters wrote a script that wasn't what you had in mind for it. He said you wanted a Catwoman film that would be relatively low-budget, a small little drama. Not a superhero film.

Exactly. Yeah.

What were your thoughts?

Well, just that. Everyday life. Her as a character. I loved her character. Like you said, her fragmented quality, and who she is, and the split sides, the dual personalities and the kind of psychotic... that's what I liked. Just, her. That's about as far as it got, but that was the sort of feeling.

Tonally, *Batman Returns* doesn't quite feel like a sequel to the first film — it feels like it's more in the spirit of, say, *Beetlejuice*.

It's not by design. Again, it's more about feeling. *Batman Returns* was, and I had Bo Welch, the designer who had done *Beetlejuice*. So there were connections. But not in the sense of me wanting it to be more like that. It's just... that's what I felt like doing.

Well, it feels like more of a piece with where you were coming from with your other films. Much more than the first *Batman*.

Yes. Well, definitely. It definitely is. And for all the points that you discussed. I did have more *carte blanche* on this. Partially because of the first one, and partially because they never really knew what we were kind of doing anyway. From *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* to *Beetlejuice*... Everything confused them a little bit. At that stage, I was kind of a mysterious figure, a cloaked figure, if you know what I mean. Like, "Okay, wow, we don't know what he was talking about but maybe he knows." I don't know what I'm talking about but I know what I want!

Certainly your perspective is all over the film. It feels like a celebration of people who don't fit in.

Absolutely. The animal people. People that are perceived as others, you know?

Do you think fondly of it?

I do. I really do. I feel really fondly about it because of the weird experiment that it felt like.

Well, it was a successful one.

Yeah. I mean, it wasn't. I think that was the issue again, when it came down to it — it wasn't as [financially] successful as the first one and therefore that fed into their, "Why is it so dark?" It fed into the fears of people.

Which is a good thing.

[Laughs] Except if you're a studio executive. ●



THE ODD

IN BRITISH COMEDY *BRIAN AND CHARLES*, A LONELY INVENTOR BUILDS HIMSELF A PECULIAR ROBOT



GOVPLE

FRIEND. WE TALK TO THE CAST AND CREW ABOUT 2022'S MOST ECCENTRIC BUDDY MOVIE

WORDS OLLY RICHARDS



HERE IS A BROAD SCALE OF IMPRESSIVENESS WHEN IT COMES TO robots in cinema. You've got your top-of-the-range Transformers, with lots of guns and the ability to fly/drive/squash houses. You've got your less weaponised options, like WALL•E or *Short Circuit's* Number 5, which have just a few gizmos and a lot of sass. Or there's your children's plaything level, like *Ron's Gone Wrong's* titular machine — basically iPads with a personality. Very low on that scale is Charles.

In terms of technical wizardry, Charles is quite possibly cinema's crappiest robot. Comprised of a one-eyed mannequin head, an old washing machine and a Speak & Spell voice box, Charles is seven feet of bad engineering that looks like Patrick Moore trying to digest a sideboard. He is nevertheless the star of one of the most original and charming British comedies of recent years.

Brian And Charles is the story of one lonely man's fear of life and a robot's discovery of its endless possibilities. Brian (David Earl) lives alone in a remote Welsh town. His only human interactions are brief, awkward conversation with the owner of the local shop; blushing pleasantries to Hazel (Louise Brealey), a woman just as lonely as him; and occasional bullying by a local farmer, Eddie (Jamie Michie). Brian prefers to spend his time in isolation, "inventing" absolutely useless objects, like a bag made of pine cones or "trawler nets for shoes".

In a moment of overly ambitious inspiration, Brian decides to build a robot out of things he has lying around his workshop. Upending all scientific logic, the robot not only works, but shows signs of rudimentary intelligence. As Brian tries to teach his new

friend about the dangers of the world and Charles begins to notice its wonders, a weird little buddy comedy grows into a life-affirming piece that has already been a hit at the Sundance Film Festival. It's quite an achievement for a film that began its life with a stand-up comedian repeatedly bombing on stage.

THE BIRTH OF *BRIAN AND CHARLES* IS SUITABLY RAMSHACKLE, THE result of multiple creators hodgepodge things together, hoping for the best, and finding against all odds that they've built something brilliant. Brian is the invention of David Earl, a British comedian best known for his appearances in multiple Ricky Gervais projects, including *Cemetery Junction*, *Derek* and *After Life*. Somewhat confusingly, there have been multiple incarnations of Brian throughout Earl's career (he played characters called Brian in both *Cemetery Junction* and *After Life*), but they all have their roots in his long-running stand-up persona, Brian Gittins.

"I was doing this character Brian who was an inept comedian who made all the wrong choices on stage," says Earl. "Bad knock-knock jokes and bad prop jokes. For the first five years of doing him, about 50 per cent of those gigs would just die horribly... He was kind of anti-comedy. He was the worst comedian in the world." After rough beginnings, Gittins' surreal shows eventually gained enough popularity that Earl toured as the character, but he began to evolve into the Brian of *Brian And Charles* by accident, when Earl was hosting an internet-based phone-in show. One day his friend, comedy producer and now *Brian And Charles* producer Rupert Majendy, rang. "He called in using this voice software," says Earl. The software produced



a standard, emotionless robotic voice that the pair found hilarious in contrast to Brian's exasperated rasp. "We created this relationship in the moment, just struggling to talk to one another. There'd be loads of pregnant pauses and it was really good fun." A listener, Chris Hayward, another comedian, thought there was significantly more potential in this.

"I heard it and I just thought it was really, really funny," says Hayward. "I listened to it over and over again. The dialogue was so stilted and there was just a hilarious relationship between this dysfunctional man and a weird robot. I wanted to see it live." Hayward knew both Earl and Majendie from the comedy circuit, so he approached the pair with his idea to bring Charles to 'life'. "I made a very cheap robot costume," he laughs. "I got a big box and bought a mannequin head off eBay, which I hollowed out because I was trying to make a puppet out of it. But I can't do any of that very well, so I just used a litter picker glued inside the mannequin's head to make the lips move. Then I glued some hair on the sides of the mannequin head. I was aiming to make it look like a Jim Henson puppet, but it just came out quite terrible."

Charles, in all his horror, was born. Earl, Hayward and Majendie created a three-person act, in which Earl would play Brian on stage, Hayward would be inside his heartbreaking robot costume and Majendie would be hidden away providing Charles' voice from a laptop. "The audience were slightly baffled," says Hayward, but the trio were enjoying it so much they kept developing the show. "I always loved the original *Vie Reeves* and *Bob Mortimer* show, *Vie Reeves Big Night Out*, because it was



Clockwise from
main: Specs
machine; Brian
(David Earl) with
invention and pal
Charles (Chris
Hayward is
in there
screened);
Robot chore;
Director Jim
Archer keeps
warm on location
in Wales; Rise
of the washing
machine.

slightly chaotic and really weird. We had songs in there. We tried to make our own live gameshow. We got to a point where it wasn't really working, but we loved them and we wanted to film them, which led to us making a short film."

2017's 12-minute version of *Brian And Charles* pared back the idea to its purest elements, and the thing that made it work in the first place: an awkward man and a robot trying clumsily to understand each other. "I thought if we treated that incredibly seriously then it would be really funny," says Jim Archer, director of both the short film and the feature. The short was shot as a mockumentary, put together in two days in Wales for £500, and then unleashed onto the internet, where most short films quietly die unwatched. *Brian And Charles* got a reaction immediately. "We were getting [lots of views] from the first day," says Archer. "We were in *The Guardian*. We got lots of comedy gatekeepers and celebrities tweeting it. It picked up very fast."

They had humble aspirations. "I was expecting about 273 views on YouTube," says Earl (it currently has 240,000). It wasn't long before Film4 got in touch to talk about making it into a feature. Unfortunately, this was not something they'd prepared for. "We've both spent years trying to develop stuff and making little short videos that nobody watched," says Hayward. "My expectations weren't very high. I didn't really think it would go anywhere." Neither was particularly sure what a *Brian And Charles* movie could be, or if it was even possible. Says Archer: "It just seemed a really long time to stare at the screen at these two characters. It really worried me." They knew, though, that they couldn't say no to the opportunity.



THERE IS A WORLD IN WHICH BRIAN AND CHARLES IS QUITE

a depressing film, as comedies go, full of broken marriage, abusive parents and grisly robot death. A version of that existed. In fact, there was an awful lot that was pretty gloomy about the creation of the film. It was supposed to go into production at the beginning of 2020. Archer was in Wales preparing to shoot when he learned, that March, that filming was going to be halted indefinitely due to the pandemic. "We just went to the line producers' room and laid out loads of bottles of wine," he says, ruefully. He had a very real fear that would be the end of his first feature: "If there's going to be one film scrapped from Film4's slate, it's going to be the weird robot comedy." When it eventually did shoot, in December that year, it was during an incredibly cold Welsh winter, under strict Covid conditions. But through all the adversity, there was a growing positivity that spread through production.

"By the time we got to make it we were all absolutely delighted to be out and around people," says Louise Brealey, who plays Hazel. "I was so thrilled to be leaving London, I grinned all the way to Snowdonia. It was just a joy." Well, it wasn't a constant joy for quite everyone.

"Try to imagine all that time in a cardboard box," says Hayward, who had not built Charles with the expectation of being inside him for more than the length of a stand-up show. "I'm actually quite claustrophobic." This was not a film with the budget to make a spangly new Charles costume. There was no monitor inside to show Hayward what was going on outside. There weren't even eyeholes. "I could see a tiny bit out of the bottom of the box,

Above: Rage against the machines.

so I'd be memorising pebbles to tell where I was, but I'd do many scenes and at the end of the take the box would be taken off and I'd be in a completely different place to where I thought I was." He couldn't even eat properly. "A take would finish and someone would pass a Penguin biscuit through a gap in Charles' shirt." He would often have to be led through scenes with Earl holding his hand. "I cannot tell you how weird it is being dragged blind up a rough hill," says Hayward. "Imagine being blindfolded and being led up a hill at quite a brisk pace." But all serious actors must suffer for their craft. "I think it's really just like Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Revenant*."

It's the clumsiness of Charles that really makes the film so charming. Filming a seven-foot-plus robot, played by someone who can't see, clattering around a tiny Welsh cottage, is comedy gold. "We'd only really measured Charles' body to make sure he could get through the door," says Archer. "But all that stuff of him banging into things and David having to lead him around, that all feeds into the character." Charles began to evolve well beyond the character in the short film. "We'd look at YouTube videos of dogs and what a dog does when its owner comes home and goes crazy," which led to a delightful scene where Brian returns home to find an overexcited Charles, who has upended the kitchen bin in anxiety. The film's Charles is part Labrador, part strumpy teen who wants to make his own choices.

It was only really after shooting that everyone involved realised just how successful the character was. That keeping the film's relationships simple, rather than trying to expand the story too much, was the best way to go. Finally, the film found its robot feet.



THE 'BRIAN AND CHARLES' THAT HAD EXCITED THEM ALL WHEN IT WAS still just a pub act was the film's selling-point. It didn't need darkness to have depth. The short film has quite a brooding air, with a lot about Brian's depression, and the team had originally beefed this up in the feature's script. There were moments explaining that Brian used to be married, in order to give his character some weightier backstory. There was a scene part-way through the film in which Charles died, choking up oil, to give a big emotional moment. There was a beefier, bleaker story for Brian's love interest, the gentle Hazel. "There was stuff in there with Hazel's abusive mum, which we shot," says Bresley. "It was really good stuff, but it made perfect sense [to lose it]. I think they started to realise they had a different film than perhaps they'd originally had in their mind. It wasn't just the movie of the short. It became its own thing." It was still a strange, eccentric comedy – but a different kind. "I thought I was making *Withnail And I*," laughs Bresley, "but I was actually making *Puddington 2*."

Brian And Charles has elements of both of those, as well as other films Earl and Hayward mention, like *Dead Man's Shoes* (for the bleak setting and sinister neighbour Eddie, who wants Charles for himself) and the output of *Wallace And Gromit* (for the useless inventions). It's a film so daftly, quintessentially British that it's come as a huge surprise to all concerned that it's been getting attention in America. It was screened as part of last year's Sundance Film Festival – sadly online-only due to Covid – and went down a storm, getting picked up by Focus Features for US distribution. "We made it to be appreciated by everyone," says Archer. "We didn't make it specifically to be just for a British



Top to bottom:
Fairground
attraction; Brian
with love interest
Hazel (Louise
Bresley); Those
plates won't
survive the
spin cycle;
Mannequin Two
failed to secure
Andrew
McCarthy and
Kian Culcraig.

audience, but we certainly didn't change anything to try to appeal [to overseas audiences]. We just made our film, but it was quite a surprise [how popular it was]." However, the more he thinks about it, the more sense it makes that it has mass appeal: "Everyone likes weird stuff, don't they?"

If paying audiences fall in love with Charles in the same way festival audiences have, there is every possibility Hayward will have to clamber into his box again. All involved have ideas for further adventures and a hope that they'll get to live them. "We've talked about it," says Hayward. "We'd all like to revisit that world. We talked about how Charles in a relationship could be quite funny." Or they can imagine a TV show featuring the character. "I think a series of some sort," says Archer. "That was the thing we talked about more on set. It's quite easy to come up with short episode ideas... I'd like to do an episode of Charles filming himself. Or Charles and a child."

If Charles does end up coming back, Hayward won't have to worry about replacing his now somewhat battered Charles costume, which is already over five years old. There are plenty of spare Charleses in reserve. "When the film got greenlit, I was so scared that I wouldn't be able to find the same mannequin head [to make spare costumes]," says Archer. "Eventually I found some on eBay and bought six. Although they arrived and they were a slightly different colour. They're all a little bit more tanned than original Charles." The next outing will just have to be set in summer. ●

BRIAN AND CHARLES IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 JULY





IN 1997, JAMES MANGOLD
BURST INTO HOLLYWOOD
WITH AN A-LIST EPIC
ABOUT A SHERIFF BATTLING
HIS OWN TOWN. AS
COP LAND
HITS 25, WE TALK
TO THE DIRECTOR
ABOUT THE MASTERPIECE
HE MADE THROUGH
SHEER FORCE OF WILL

WORDS: ALEX GOREFFREY



ILLUSTRATION: TONY STELLA

"A BELLY HANGING OVER HIS BELT, HE IS A SLUMP-SHOULDERED MAN, PUFFY, WILTED. DULL WITH BOOZE."

FREDDY HEFLIN IS the first person we meet in James Mangold's 1996 shooting script for *Cop Land*, playing a *Lethal Weapon* pinball machine. He's a nominal sheriff in a town inhabited by corrupt cops, a doorman who will become a hero; a turtle who finally comes out of his shell; a classic character that gave its actor a chance to surprise audiences, and its writer-director an entire career.

James Mangold wrote *Cop Land* in 1994, while production delays had temporarily halted the shooting of his debut film, *Heavy*, a small indie about a lonely cook. *Cop Land* was supposed to be small, too — but things changed. Thanks to that script, and to Mangold's stubborn determination, it ended up starring a stunningly heavyweight cast. Stallone. De Niro. Keitel. Liotta. And on, and on, and on.

It is a film about dizzying levels of police corruption, resonating today more than ever. And there was drama off-screen too, with Mangold thrust into a post-production process in which he — and the film — just about survived. "As all things with the light of day and time going by reveal, Miramax was a real cesspool of crossed alliances, and strange allies and enemies," he tells *Empire* now of the studio that gave him almost everything he wanted — at a price. "And I was a young man in a very weird place, just trying to stay above water."

MANGOLD WAS DEVASTATED when Liv Tyler delayed *Heavy*, just as it was about to go. It was 1994: Tyler was the co-star (alongside Pruitt Taylor Vince), but had been offered another film (*Silent Fall*) she couldn't turn down, so Mangold would have to wait a whopping six months to get her back. "It was really painful, because I was poised to make the movie," he says. "You finally get together what little money you can to make a movie, and then you postpone it. So I suddenly had this crushing six months. And I didn't know what to do. And I was broke."

So what did he do? He wrote. Years earlier, aged 21, he had a deal at Disney but was fired from directing a TV movie after three days. Scared and depressed from the experience, he went home, so here he was at 30, back living with his parents in New York's Hudson Valley, finishing a master's degree at Columbia University, his debut film in limbo. But

★
Main: Internal Affairs' Moss Tilden (Robert De Niro) with Sheriff Freddy Hefflin (Stallone). Below: Bad lieutenant Ray Donlan (Harvey Keitel) with cops Jack Rucker (Robert Patrick) and Frank Lagarda (Arthur J. Nascarella).



something personal began to percolate.

Each morning, as he commuted through New Jersey to New York City, he was absorbed by the world around him. "I had grown up in my parents' town of Washingtonville, New York, where almost all my friends were the sons and daughters of cops and firemen in New York City," he says. "And their fathers or mothers commuted to the city every day and came back to their small town." One particular housing development, Worley Heights, near Washingtonville, experienced this acutely. The cops would leave their domestic idylls every day, heading into New York City which, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was a pressure cooker. They'd work in an urban Hell and come back home to suburban Heaven. Meanwhile, in 1994, Los Angeles was still reeling from the Rodney King riots as, in New York, Mayor David N. Dinkins had appointed the Mollen Commission to investigate allegations of police

corruption. With Mangold absorbing all of this, *Cop Land* came quickly.

"The analogy to Westerns was really clear to me, if you looked at these cops as kind of Western figures, who were somehow moving to a new frontier, a place that's free of whatever they were fleeing," he says. He landed on the idea of a local cop — a sheriff — modelled on the type of character that the actor Van Heflin played in the likes of *Shane* and *3:10 To Yuma* — the guy who was overshadowed by the showier alpha characters before finding his courage.

"I remember carving out the story in my mind one nugget at a time: what if he always wanted to be a New York City cop, but never could? I investigated, and being deaf in one ear was one of the things I found: if you don't have good hearing, you can't be a cop. And then something struck me one day, driving on the Palisades Parkway: 'Wouldn't it be incredible to do the ultimate gunfighter showdown in the movie in silence?' I got very mythological: Freddy was a guy who had never achieved his dreams. And his admiration for these city cops was admirable, but also something that had kept him in place. For me, his hearing became more than a gimmick: he would be set free the moment he could no longer hear them. He'd be empowered by shutting off their words." Mangold called him Hefflin. Freddy Hefflin.





HEWROTE THE first draft in a week, chain-smoking cigarettes, barely sleeping, living on cereal, listening to Bruce Springsteen (as Freddy would in the film), with the Mollen Commission hearings on the television. Then, while *Heavy* was being filmed, the *Cop Land* script made its way into the world and a bidding war broke out. Mangold was offered seven-figure sums, but, despite his dire financial straits, finally went with Miramax — then run by the Weinsteins — for a tenth of what others were offering, as Miramax was the only place allowing him to direct it himself. Mangold had insisted on this, still shaken from his Disney debacle. “That was one of the most traumatic experiences of my young life, and I didn’t want to go through it again,” he says.

Harvey Weinstein did attempt to persuade him to stand aside when Robert De Niro, who loved the *Cop Land* script, asked to direct it. Mangold wouldn’t budge, though, moving forward with casting. He started, of course, with Freddy, and the tussles he had there summed up the chasm between how he and Miramax viewed the film, with them wanting another *Pulp Fiction* — cool and hip — and him seeing it as something “more plodding and methodical and classical. It’s not a needle drop every three seconds. It’s not banter.”

For Freddy, Weinstein suggested the likes of John Travolta or George Clooney, who was “all of 30 years old and stunningly gorgeous.” Mangold wanted an everyman — John Turturro, Gary Sinise — someone who wouldn’t obviously become the hero by the end. “Almost by definition, this role is unsexy. It needs to be a guy who has everything stacked against him. But Harvey didn’t give a shit what I was saying. He just wanted someone, probably, that would get him pre-sales around the world.”



Left: Ray Liotta as Gary ‘Figgys’ Figgis. Right, top to bottom: Pretrial time; Deputy Sheriff Cindy Betts (Janesse Garofalo); Michael Rapaport — who plays Murray ‘Superboy’ Babble — and Stallone chat while Sly gets retouched.





★
Clockwise from
above: De Niro
holds court as
he, Mangold and
Stallone prep
the next scene;
The sheriff cuts
a lovely figure;
Freddy and
Figgie get
down to
business.



Mangold played along to an extent, but the big names turned it down anyway. Weinstein did eventually let him offer it to Sinise, but, during a meeting for which Mangold flew to Los Angeles, Sinise turned it down, too. "Because it wasn't sexy enough," says the director of Sinise's reasoning. "And I was crushed."

It was at this point that Sylvester Stallone's agent called up. Just as Mangold got home, Arnold Rifkin asked, "What would you think about the idea of Sylvester Stallone to play Freddy Hefflin?" Mangold was confused. "I was like, 'Are you kidding me?' And he goes, 'No, I'm not kidding.' And I go, 'I think it's a terrible idea. He hasn't made a good movie since *Rocky*. He hasn't played a human being since *Rocky*. He's got this Planet Hollywood posse. He's difficult with directors, he's taken over movies. I've heard he won't let people shoot him on this side of his face, only that side. I don't think he has any artistic credibility or adds any to the movie... I think he'll hurt the movie.' He goes, 'Well, why don't you tell all this to him? He's flying out to New York and he wants to have dinner with you. He's read your script and loves it.'"

Mangold didn't want the star in the movie, and didn't want to meet him to tell him he didn't want him in the movie. Weinstein persuaded him to, though, and off Mangold went to the Four Seasons for dinner with Sylvester Stallone.

"I felt like I was being railroaded," he says. "I loved *Rocky*, I liked 'Rambo' [*First Blood*], there were things I could admire in Stallone. But the idea of him in this role was extremely threatening to me." Afraid that "the nightmare was happening again", a repeat of his experience at Disney, where he lost control of what he was doing, he was ready to tell Stallone what he thought — but was blindsided as soon as he saw the actor, sitting there waiting for him, slumped and smiling. Mangold didn't see an action hero, but a human being. "He led the way, saying, 'Look, I know I've made a lot of bad movies. And I know you're not a fan of a lot of my movies. But I'm still an actor.'"

Nevertheless, Mangold read him the riot act, listing all the things Stallone couldn't do if he cast him. "I said, 'You're chiselled, you're a megastar, you've defeated galaxies and armies and Apollo Creed; there's no way an audience is going to imagine that you're not up to the task of taking on these dirty cops. And it's a real struggle for me.' And he goes, 'Well, what would I have to

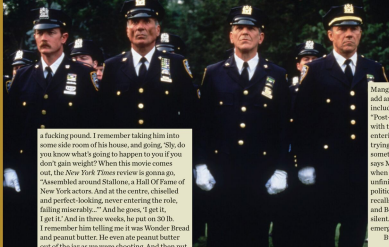
do?' And I go, 'Well, you'd have to gain 30 to 40 lb. And I mean fat pounds. You'd have to look like a mook from New Jersey and not this Adonis that you are.' He goes, 'I'll do it.' Mangold went on. "The posse, the trailers, the bravado, all of it would have to go." He goes, "Okay."

As Mangold left their dinner meeting, he knew he'd found Freddy Hefflin.

WITH A LEGEND in the lead, Mangold told Weinstein that Stallone would need to be surrounded by major actors — people who would "dwarf him and confuse the audience about who's going to win in this picture." Things escalated quickly. De Niro invited Mangold over to discuss the script, and signed up to play Internal Affairs' Moe Tilden, investigating the corruption flowing through (the fictional) Garrison, New Jersey. De Niro told Mangold that, despite the director's lack of experience, he needed to *direct* him: "He told me, 'Whatever you need, you have to tell me. I don't care if you shout it while I'm in the scene. Just tell me what you need.'"

De Niro introduced Mangold to Harvey Keitel — he became the de facto mayor of Cop Land, nasty sonofabitch Ray Donlan. Ray Liotta, who had earlier wanted to play Freddy (Mangold thought he didn't have the requisite innocence), was cast as coked-up lone wolf Gary 'Figgie' Figgis. And then came Peter Berg, Robert Patrick, Michael Rapaport, Janeane Garofalo... a formidable bunch of cops to play off against Stallone's fragile Freddy.

As promised, Stallone put on 41 lb., eventually. "I went down to see Sy three weeks before we started shooting in Florida," remembers Mangold. "And he hadn't gained



a fucking pound. I remember taking him into some side room of his house, and going, 'Sly, do you know what's going to happen to you if you don't gain weight? When this movie comes out, the *New York Times* review is gonna go, "Assembled around Stallone, a Hall Of Fame of New York actors. And at the centre, chiselled and perfect-looking, never entering the role, failing miserably..." And he goes, 'I get it. I get it.' And in three weeks, he put on 30 lb. I remember him telling me it was Wonder Bread and peanut butter. He even ate peanut butter out of the jar as we were shooting. And then put on another 10 to 12 lb as we were shooting."

With that cast, Mangold had his work cut out. For a key scene in which De Niro and Keitel bump into each other at a coffee joint, their smiles thinly disguising years of bad blood, each actor wanted to be the first to enter the scene — it had been scripted as Keitel, but Mangold changed it the morning of the shoot, as the switch made more sense. And egos clashed.

"Harvey said, 'I think I should be entering.' And Bob said, 'I like it when I enter.' So I suddenly find myself in the middle of whatever kind of strange, cosmic, fraternal energy they have with each other, but also having to kind of control it. I lost about an hour of shooting time trying to negotiate this, and then I finally lost my temper. I suddenly exploded and said, 'I'm standing in a room with two actors who both want to enter the scene, and so that means the fucking scene starts in an empty *FUCKING* room. So someone's gonna have to *FUCKING* be here when the other guy walks in.' And De Niro goes, 'Hey, whatever you want, Jim.' And Keitel goes, 'I'll do whatever you want to but you're making

a mistake if it's Bob who enters.' And I go, 'Well, it's Bob who enters.' And then we shot the scene."

Wrangling actors' egos was, though, nothing compared to what Mangold was faced with during post-production. The first test-screening, populated by legions of Stallone fans who'd come to see the star of *Daylight* and *Cliffhanger* take down a bunch of cops, was a disaster. "Before the movie began, they were chanting, 'Rocky! Rocky! Rocky! Rocky!'" Then Stallone's Freddy rolled over in bed, his belly spilling out. "There was a collective gasp from the audience," recalls Mangold. "To me, it was a good gasp. But it made my studio, my autocratic, dangerous, terrifying studio bosses, insist that that had to go."

That audience scored the film poorly. "I got bludgeoned, for making a depressive, methodical movie, when everyone had come in expecting either *Pulp Fiction* or *Rambo*. All the expectations that Miramax had for the movie were out the window unless I could get the score up." This heralded a miserable editing process — "a very painful experience" — in which

Mangold was made to cut and trim scenes, add an opening voiceover by De Niro, and include a more positive, sentimental ending. "Post-production became a kind of free-for-all, with the very imperious hand of the Weinsteins entering my cutting room all the time, and trying to manipulate the movie into being something that ultimately it never could be," says Mangold. It nearly broke him. Especially when the Weinsteins solicited opinions on the unfinished film from film critics, cops and politicians. "It was a nightmare," Mangold recalls. "There was a point at which Harvey and Bob were like, 'We don't want the gunfight silent.' Everything was a battle, until I somehow emerged from that film."

But he did emerge.

FROM A \$15 MILLION budget, *Cop Land* brought in nearly \$64 million at the box office. The film was a turning-point for Mangold. "I learned how to direct a large motion picture," he says — in its wake came the likes of *War*, *The Line*, *Logan*, and next, the fifth Indiana Jones film. At the time, though, due to that hellish post-production period, he couldn't enjoy its success. A decade later, he'd assemble a director's cut, restoring and re-editing scenes. But back in 1997, it hurt. "When I came out the other side, I felt damaged," he says. "It took me years to feel good about the movie again. The process of getting the movie out was so brutal that... it's not unlike people who go through any kind of trauma or difficulties. You don't heal immediately."

He's healed now. As the years went by, he saw that more and more people were appreciating it for what it was: "A meditation on the very different strains in America, in particular in relation to law and order, and crime and racism, and class." In *Cop Land*, the plot is accelerated by white cop Babitch (Michael Rapaport) accidentally killing two young Black men, leading to a corrupt cover-up. Mangold's exploration of these cops, living in suburbia but policing a city over the bridge that they felt no affinity for, hit home after the killing of George Floyd in 2020.

"What was so interesting to me and is still interesting to me," says Mangold of his script's inspiration, "is that our country is still highly segregated. Mostly by wealth. Racial lines end up falling in along with it. But that segregation produces a kind of myopia or ignorance, and people who view people over the hill in the other neighbourhood as 'other', or less than [them]. Cops who don't live in the neighbourhoods they patrol... you are literally a mercenary in someone else's neighbourhood, and that is going to always lead to trouble. And to me, the country has never kind of reckoned with that issue."

It was a prescient film, and Mangold's fight to make it as he wanted to has ensured it's endured, too. Even he can enjoy it now. "The ultimate score is a long game," he says. "The game of trying to make things with enough craft and care that they live and stay relevant." He won. ●



Top: Line of
mis-duties.
Puckles,
Lagorda, Leo
Crasky (John
Speranza) and
Dorian. Right:
Can the former
Rocky Balboa
and John Rambo
set this corrupt
world to rights?

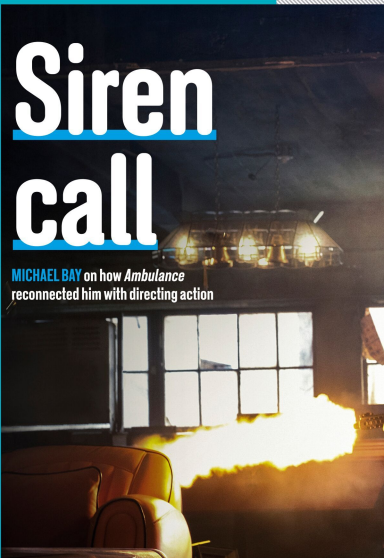


! SPOILER WARNING

INDISPENSABLE HOME ENTERTAINMENT EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT

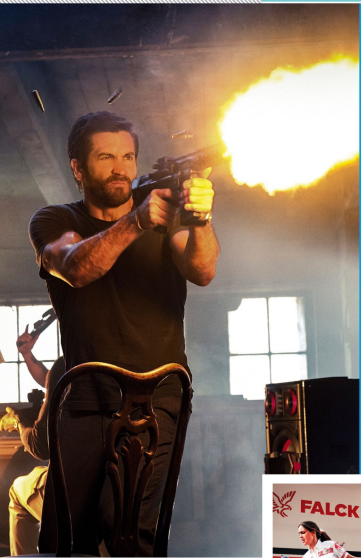
Siren call

MICHAEL BAY on how *Ambulance* reconnected him with directing action



NOT MANY DIRECTORS have had a word coined specifically as a result of their dedication to the noble craft of blowing shit up. Michael Bay has. 'Bayhem' doesn't just work as a word because it's a damn good pun (and it is a damn good pun), but because Bay, from the minute he roared onto screens with 1995's *Bad Boys*, showing off his trademark (if, it's fair to say, not universally beloved) fast-cutting, camera-whirling style, has blown up anything that can be blown up, and most things that can't. Yet, for all his success, it had seemed that the two-time Criterion Collection honouree (in the US at

least) had perhaps lost his edge, dulled by a succession of *Transformers* sequels. *Ambulance* changes all that. The story of two brothers (Jake Gyllenhaal's Danny and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II's Will), who rob an LA bank and wind up making a desperate getaway in a stolen ambulance with a paramedic (Eiza González' Cam) and a badly wounded cop (who had actually been shot by Will during their getaway), it's a smaller, more intimate and intense movie than we are used to from Bay, and very much a return to form for the director who — engorged and galvanised by the relative restrictions



imposed by a meagre (ahem) \$40 million budget — injects the movie with energy, brio, and enough swooping drone shots to power a YouTube channel. We sat down with the fast-talking filmmaker for a deep dive into his process on the movie and, yes, all the Bayhem.

The script for *Ambulance* had been kicking around Hollywood for a while when it first came to you during the pandemic. What grabbed you about it?
So, let's take us back to March 14 [2020]. The NBA shuts down, the world goes, "What?" Then

Above: Let the Bayhem commence!
Jake Gyllenhaal stars as bankrobber Danny Sharp in Michael Bay's first post-pandemic movie.
Right: And... action! Lots of action.

it's like, "Oh my God, is this like the bubonic plague? What is this? Do we scrub down all our things?" It's very hard to be creative. I was working on a movie called 'Black S', something I wrote 14 years ago. I'm working with Ehren Kruger, writing it, and then all of a sudden this happens. And it's like, creativity stops for about two months. When I think back about it, I get the chills. It's like, the world shut down. I said to my agent, "I just want to get out there. I'm done writing. I want to get out of my house." He said, "There's a script that was sitting around for six years." It was based on this other Danish movie that I never saw. It was interesting because I was writing a crime story where it was all about intensity. I wanted the audience to feel like they're on a crime. I rejiggered the script with Chris Fedak, the writer, really fast. I wrote my own action, added a bunch of elements and different conflicts and tensions, and we got her up and running. I called Donna Langley, who's the head of Universal, and I said, "Donna, I don't care about action. I've done enough action to last me a lifetime. What I'm interested in with this movie is, I want to see if I can do a study of tension." There's a myriad of conflicts going on. You've got the hostage. What's it like? She has to manipulate these two bank robbers. She's used to saving lives. She's got to take control of the situation in whatever way she can. Cops say if you ever get carjacked, if they put a gun to your head, you're supposed to make eye contact because it shows that you're a human being. And it makes them sympathetic. They say you're a lot easier to shoot if you turn your head [away], as there's no face.

You humanise yourself, basically.

Yeah. So she starts to ingratiate herself to one and there's a lot of manipulation. She's trying to save a life.

How different was the script you shot?

It's pretty different. I changed a lot of the third act. I added some emotional beats. I felt it was



very important for Cam to have a journey. I've known a bunch of paramedics and they're first in and they see gross stuff. They have to have a sense of humour because it's very morbid. I needed her to come full circle. She doesn't care about her patients. Basically, what you try to do as a paramedic, you try to keep them alive for 20 minutes. That's basically what you got. And then boom, drop them, forget them. And she goes through this whole experience over the next three hours of being a hostage and saving a life and manipulating these criminals and dealing with the cops secretly. It's so emotional. The movie is about caring. The bad guys care about her, and she cares about them. Someone said to me, "This is an interesting movie because no-one fucking cares anymore in this world."

Which is why you have her come back to the hospital at the end...

That's put in by me. I also added a lot of police tactics. People will say, "That's not how they do the chase." Let me correct the audience that thinks that. There are 80 real LAPD in this movie. Every sniper, every SWAT, the undercover, the SIS. Every one is real. There are amazingly few actors in there. There's a lot of police tactics where they put pressure on, put pressure off. I thought they just chased on a freeway and stayed behind, but they don't. They'll relax, they'll switch cars out, they'll play mind games with them, they'll give them breaks. And listen, I got a lot of special favours. I've got the gift of the gab. I've talked myself into being the only director in the world to ever get the Space Shuttle, and get the Space Shuttle on the pad. Twice. I've talked my way into the Giza Pyramids. No-one's done that in 40 years. There's a whole bunch of firsts.

Any firsts on *Ambulance*?

Well, yeah. I had a young producer on this one. He goes, "Michael, it's gonna cost us \$300,000 to shut the freeway down." First day, there's a little shitty van. We take the seats out, they strap me down in it, with our camera on the back, and they ratchet up the back door so I'm now staring out the back of it. I don't even have a camera car — that's how cheap this movie was. I'm going old school, baby! So I see five Highway Patrol [cars] roll up, and they all know who I am. They go, "We love your movies, sir, let's take some pictures." I'm like, "Yeah, we were just supposed to shoot some interviews of the ambulance driving on the freeway. I would love to put you guys in the movie." They go, "Really?" "Yeah. When you do a chase, how do you do it?" "Well, we'll dig with him, we'll move in and out, we'll switch lanes." I go, "Really? Awesome. So I'm gonna give each of



Top to bottom: Darryl takes paramedic Cam (Eliza González) hostage; Director Michael Bay issuing instructions on set; Upping the ante again; The real LAPD help out; The real LAPD help out; The cops in hot pursuit



you a mic, and a walkie talkie. And we start off slowly." We were taking big sections of a live freeway, by the way. And then as the day starts to go on, I said, "Hey, can we do a rolling block?" "Sure!" A rolling block is where one car starts to sweep across the whole freeway and real cars stop and the freeway just shuts down. "Let's do a rolling block but for two minutes. I don't want to piss people off, okay?" And it was awesome. They shut it down for free. And now we're running at 90 miles an hour on a live freeway. My assistant cameraman, the focus puller, goes, "This is awesome, this looks so real." It was real. So that's how you get free production value. [Laughs]

It's interesting that you cut out the preamble. We get to the bank robbery very quickly, and by the time Zach, the cop who gets shot, rolls up to the bank, the robbery's underway. You cut to the chase.

It's true. My mom wishes probably that I'd done that on a lot of my movies. She goes, "Michael, these movies are too fucking long." This one's not too long. This is two [hours] oh-seven. Maybe



Left: Brothers
Danny and Will
(Yahya Abdul-Mateen
II) feel the heat.

Below, top
to bottom: A blooded
corn emergency;
Cutting to the chase;
Danny — getting
desperate.



I could have cut six minutes out, but you know what? When you cut that out you're cutting out jokes, you're cutting out character moments that might be fluff. You're cutting out slowing the audience down for just a moment to catch their breath because the pace is non-stop. I'm used to shooting these big blockbusters where it's got a zinger at the end of the scene. This doesn't have that because it's real. What I love is when you start assembling the scenes and start putting Lorne's [Hafke, composer] cues on it, all of a sudden the tension starts building. And that's what's really cool. I had confidence in this movie. It doesn't have to have a zinger. It has to just slowly build at times.

There's a lot of drone shots in this movie, where you have one coming down from on high, and driving straight at the action.

I have a little pressure on me.



You've got to not top yourself, but always stay at the top of your game with action. One person said, "It's antiquated action." Really? That's not how I see it. I do real shit. Those are almost all real stunts. There's very little CG in the movie. We do real crashes. There's a thousand stunts in this. Not even a Band-Aid on this show, which means everyone was safe. But drone-work on movies is usually boring. I'm like, "I need to spice this up." It's not trying to do a *Raining in Arizona* with bizarre camera angles, but it's to do some cool work and figure out how to keep the intensity in. I got these kids, 19 years old. They're drone-racers, and we invented some camera systems. And of course, I give the tough love to them. "I want you to fly under that car and we're gonna jump that police car. You've got a clearance of 18 inches and you need to time it right as it jumps over." "Do I get to practise?" "No, you don't get to practise. You get one try, that's it. I'm only jumping once. Don't fuck it up!" [Laughs] It helped get some adrenaline. We used drones inside, which is interesting. It was a fun one to do. I was surprised how the emotion came in the movie. You end up caring for two people doing something bad. It's odd.

The moral rollercoaster that Danny and Will are on is really interesting.

I think we fantasise about crime. That's why crime is so interesting to watch on movies and TV. We think, "What would it be like to get away with it? What would it be like? Oh, I'd be smarter. How'd you screw that one up?" You know, I think we all plan crimes. "They still rob banks?" How do they get round all the Plexiglas?" I do like a good heist movie. I tried to keep it grounded and intense.

Well, Will does get away with it, to an extent.

The FBI is asking the cop who gets shot, "Who shot you?" It's a great moment with his finger coming up and he points to Yahya—Will—and says, "He saved my life." That tells me that he might get five years, six years, seven years. Cam's gonna vouch for him. This cop's gonna vouch for him. He could have been induced by his brother, forced to do this. I think he might have got five to six years. And the wife was given money. You must serve the time, you gotta pay for your crime, but I'm thinking he might get ten years and get off in five to six. That's paying his price. I think it's weirdly satisfying. **CHRIS HEWITT**

AMBULANCE IS OUT ON 15 JUNE ON DIGITAL, AND ON 27 JUNE ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND 4K. THE EMPIRE PODCAST AMBULANCE SPOILER SPECIAL, WITH MCFE MICHAEL BAY, WILL BE OUT ON 20 JUNE.

Brooke Adams
as stricken
public-health
reporter
Elizabeth
Driscoll

THE MASTERPIECE

We reassess the greatest
films of all time, one
film at a time

Invasion Of The Body Snatchers

SO THE STORY goes, the night after *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*' LA release in December 1978, some marketing was scattered replica pods around the city. Inundated with panicked calls from people seemingly afraid of being assimilated by aliens, the LAPD did not appreciate the stunt. As PR pranks go, it's hammy stuff, but the frazzled reaction shows how deeply the film rattled audiences—especially with that screamer of an ending still

ringing in their skulls (more on that later).

Philip Kaufman's remake is a very different beast from Don Siegel's 1956 classic. Whereas Siegel used the concept of brainwashed alien doppelgängers as a jittery allegory of Cold War paranoia, Kaufman's film is far more slippery, wide open for interpretation and, let's be frank, still fucking terrifying.

The eerie opening sequence sets the tone to come. Bubbling from the surface of a barren planet, a swarm of glutinous spores travel through space, closing in on a distant blue dot. Compared to the boomgassms of, say, *Independence Day*, it's as stark and economical as an alien invasion gets (literally; the effects were achieved with a \$12 vat of goo bought in an art store).

From the moment the spores start infesting the plant life, Kaufman approaches the otherworldly invasion as if it were plausible. The streets of San Francisco feel gritty and lived-in. His heroes, Matthew Bennell (Donald Sutherland) and Elizabeth Driscoll (Brooke Adams), are unglamorous public-health inspectors. The supporting cast, be it Jeff Goldblum's twitchy poet, or Leonard Nimoy's self-help guru, build shaded, nuanced characters. Nobody pauses to deliver an exposition dump or behaves like a Horror-Movie Moron. Faced with an insidious hostile force turning everyone they know into blank-eyed replicas, they react exactly as anyone would: first denial, then confusion, then slow-gasping panic.

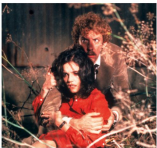
It's this emotional grounding—a very 1970s, Movie Britishish approach—that distinguishes it

from its B-movie predecessor. True, Siegel gave Kaufman his blessing and cameos as a cab driver, and original survivor Kevin McCarthy pops up yelping, "You're next!" (implying he's been screaming about the pods for 20 years). You could argue it's a sneaky sequel, but tonally the films are planets apart.

The pod-vasion is so horribly believable, fortified by Sutherland's committed performance. And we mean committed. Sutherland's insistence on doing his own stunts turned him into a human *piñata*: a VW Beetle hit him during a chase scene and he was nearly fried by a rogue fireball while filming the explosive pod-factory sequence. Who knows... maybe Sutherland's doppelgänger paranoia was so ingrained, he was too scared to hire a stunt double.

To understand what compelled Kaufman to remake a classic, you only have to look at his choice of location. In the late 1960s, San Francisco was the world's countercultural epicentre: a hippie paradise hanging the tambourine from an unshackled, free-thinking utopia. By 1978, Flower Power had turned to fungus, idealism had rotted into disillusionment, and San Francisco was succumbing to the same mechanised hum as any other city. It was already being podified. What better place, figured Kaufman, to show America's societal decay?

The film offers so many readings (is it a parable of mindless consumerism? An eco-disaster allegory?), you could rub your chin until your face catches fire. As an experience, it



Clockwise from above left: Jeff Goldblum and Veronica Cartwright as Mud Bath Spa owners Jack and Nancy Bellioco; Donald Sutherland's Matthew Bennell tries to protect Elizabeth; Leonard Nimoy plays Dr David Kibner.



triggers something far more primal. "You'll never close your eyes again," goes the tag, and *Body Snatchers* stages a stealth assault on that most basic of human vulnerabilities: the pods only claim you when you're sleeping. Who hasn't woken up in the dead of night, unsure if an intruder's lurking in the shadows?

That creeping fear is exploited mercilessly in the gruesome, maggotty pod-birth scenes, but the lasting unease is subliminal, with sound and visuals slowly coalescing into a fever dream. As Ben Burt's soundscape mutates from city sounds to discordant howls, Michael Chapman's cinematography shapeshifts from lucid reality to noir-mare. The paranoid first half is all easy handhold. Then the style deadens as the inescapable truth hits. Colours drain, shadows seep and the camera begins to lurk with an unneringly still pod-glare. (Look out for Adams and Sutherland being chased by their own shadows in the third act: a crafty bit of foreshadowing.)

Still, Kaufman isn't shy of delivering some visceral shocks. Sutherland gooiily braining his own doppelgänger with a tyre iron; a pod-claimed Adams shrinking from his embrace like a crumbling waxwork; and, of course, the hideous pod-dog wearing its owner's face — a cannot-be-unseen moment made worse by some cannot-be-unread trivia (that slobbering tongue is real: the FX team slathered the dog's mask in syrup to make it extra lickable).

What this all adds up to is one of the blakest, boldest studio pictures of the '70s. The characters are running backwards on an escalator to hell here; all they can do is see their fate coming. The pods will get them in the end.

And what an ending. Kaufman doesn't let his audience off the hook: he leaves you hanging like

a carcass in a slaughterhouse freezer. When Donald Sutherland unleashed that soul-scooping Munchian scream outside San Francisco City Hall, Kaufman didn't tell Veronica Cartwright (as the stubbornly human Nancy Bellioco) that Sutherland's character was One Of Them. If her shock triggers an authentic shudder, that's because she was authentically shuddering herself.

It's been four decades since that scream first traumatised audiences, and the nightmare fuel still burns. Sutherland breaking the fourth wall, pointing at the audience, implicating all of us. The feeling of being swallowed whole as the camera sinks into the abyss of his mouth. The credits rolling in crushing silence, cocooning you alone in the darkness. As parting shots go, it remains one of horror's most unforgiving.

Body Snatchers' spirit lives on. You can see its influence in films from John Carpenter's *They Live* to Jordan Peele's *Us*, while Kaufman's film still resonates as a creepily prescient wake-up call for a civilisation sleepwalking into apathy. Speaking on the film's 40th anniversary, screenwriter W.D. Richter was convinced we still are. "We've grown so disillusioned with the treachery of government," he says, "people are closing off." Sound familiar? Maybe there's a bit of pod in all of us now. Maybe they're already here. Sleep tight.

SIMON CROOK

INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (1978) IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL



investigate spine-centric shenanigans robbing people of their personalities. Cold, distant, and muddled, it's as if everyone involved had been replaced by doppelgängers devoid of any of their charm or ability. CHRIS HEWITT

INVASION OF THE INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS

KAUFMAN'S IS ONE OF FOUR OFFICIAL BODY SNATCHERS MOVIES. HERE ARE THE OTHERS



INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (1956)

Don Siegel's black-and-white original, based on Jack Finney's 1954 novel *The Body Snatchers*, tapped into the vein of paranoia that had begun to grip America in the era of McCarthyism and the panic over Communism. Told in flashback, as Kevin McCarthy recounts a bizarre story of an insidious takeover of America by people who look like us, talk like us, but have deeply disturbing motives, it's one of the great B movies of the '50s, down to the iconic ending in which McCarthy has a meltdown in the middle of a traffic jam. Unlike most of the movies and TV shows it inspired, it actually ends on a note of hope.

BODY SNATCHERS (1993)

In a way still the odd one out on the filmography of Abel Ferrara, this is the most overtly commercial and action-orientated *Body Snatchers* to date, relocating the action to an army base (where, the gag is, people are conditioned to behave like automatons anyway, so how can you possibly tell the difference?). It wasn't well received upon its release, but is effectively insidious at times, with Meg Tilly particularly creepy, although the ending, involving chase sequences and helicopters and explosions, feels like it was ported in from a different movie.

THE INVASION (2007)

Like Ferrara's film, Oliver Hirschbiegel's movie jettisons part of the original title. And, as it turns out, Hirschbiegel himself, with a famously troubled production leading to James McTeigue coming on to direct some additional scenes — written by the Wachowskis, no less — for the movie, which sees Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig

investigate spine-centric shenanigans robbing people of their personalities. Cold, distant, and muddled, it's as if everyone involved had been replaced by doppelgängers devoid of any of their charm or ability. CHRIS HEWITT

Judd Apatow's comedy heroes

As his new George Carlin documentary arrives, the writer/director reveals the funnymen and women who inspired him

ILLUSTRATION SELMAN HOSGÖR

JUDD APATOW KNOWS a thing or two about comedy. Not just as a writer, producer and director of films such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*, *The King Of Staten Island* and this year's Netflix spoof comedy *The Bubble*, but as a lifelong student of the form. Recently, he's turned his hand to documenting the greatest comedians on the planet, whether it's in his interview books such as *Sick In The Head* (a sequel, *Sicker In The Head*, is on its way too), or documentaries. After his epic celebration of his former mentor in *The Zen Diaries Of Garry Shandling* back in 2018, Apatow has now co-directed (with Michael Bonfiglio) George Carlin's *American Dream*, a two-part, four-hour deep-dive into the life and times of the legendarily subversive stand-up. Here, he talks to *Empire* about those men, and some of his other comedy heroes. Documentaries about each of them not guaranteed, by the way.

GEORGE CARLIN

"I remember being a little kid — ten, 11 years old — and having *AM & FM* and *Class Clown*, these records he made, and back then we had attention spans. So you might listen to the record over and over again, and I thought about everything he was saying. As somebody who aspired to be funny, I felt like he must have really programmed me about how to look at things and how to break them down, to find humour in them. He was always looking for bullshit. He attacked systems and hypocrisy. George Carlin was

questioning everything, and I never knew we were supposed to do that."

GARRY SHANDLING

"Garry was more of a hero for me in his storytelling. The work that he did on *It's Garry Shandling's Show* changed television, because he broke down all the walls and showed people what the medium could do. The people who wrote for *The Simpsons* point to *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, where Garry broke the fourth wall and talked to the crowd and did all these innovative things, as the moment they realised what was possible. And *The Larry Sanders*



SHANDLING: SHUTTERSTOCK



Left: "Waddy means, I'm funny?" George, Garry, Gilda and on bring the laughs. Below: Judd Apatow, possibly thinking of his comedy heroes.

night, and sat in the back row and it was the biggest laughs I ever heard in my life. I would work with Jim on polishes on some of the Tom Shadyac movies he did, like *Liar Liar* and *Bruce Almighty*, and thought, 'Is there a way to do big set-piece comedy and say anything via that?'"

EDDIE MURPHY

"I was a dish-washer at a comedy club in 1983, and Eddie Murphy used to come in and he was still doing stand-up. He was the Prince Of Comedy. It's hard to say he was an inspiration because it seemed like he was even bigger than that. He was on another planet. He was so charismatic. From the moment he opened his mouth, it was clear that somebody was about to take over everything. There was nothing more fun than him coming back and hosting *Saturday Night Live* [in 2019]. Everyone was like, 'I wonder if he'll be funny?' He hasn't done something like this in ages. And then he just destroyed it."

GILDA RADNER

"There was no-one more likeable than Gilda Radner. I grew up on *Saturday Night Live*, and she was one of my favourite people. I remember seeing her on Broadway. She did a one-woman show that was directed by Mike Nichols, and she did all of her characters — Lisa Looper and Roseanne Roseannadanna, and she did a character based on Janis Joplin and Patti Smith called Candy Slice. That was one of the highlights of my comedy childhood, seeing her in person."

ALBERT BROOKS

"Modern Romance affected all of us very deeply. It was deeply personal and neurotic and riotously funny. It was the comedy of personality. He was digging into his personal stuff on screen. You would wait for him to do any type of talk show when I was a kid. It almost felt like he was the J.D. Salinger of comedy — you never knew when he would show up. But when he did, you would treasure it. It was a very special moment to get him to agree to be one of the stars of *This Is 40*. Every night before we shot, he would email me ideas for joke punch-ups for the next day, and they were always really incredible." CHRIS HEWITT

GEORGE DUKAKIS'S AMERICAN DREAM IS OUT NOW ON SKY AND NOW THE BUBBLE IS OUT NOW ON NETFLIX

Show is so funny, but goes so deep. He wanted to get to the core of human behaviour. He only had two stand-up specials, and the one thing I mourn about Garry's career is I wish he had five other specials, because he was so funny. But I think his energy was more in film and television."

MEL BROOKS

"Sometimes it's fun to go hard as a director. The *Bubble* was a really fantastic way to talk about our suffering, and the madness of this time. A lot of people say about comedy when you make a joke, 'Too soon! Too soon!' And when we made *The Bubble*, the whole time I kept saying, 'This isn't even too soon, this is now.' I like making movies like that and *Walk Hard [The Dewey Cox Story]* every once in a while, where we're working with a very different comic aesthetic. It's so difficult. People talk about comedies as a lower art, but they're harder than anything in film. To make

a movie wall-to-wall really funny may be the most difficult thing anyone can do. That's why Mel Brooks is the greatest filmmaker, because he pulled that off so many times. I saw *Young Frankenstein* about ten years ago in a movie theatre with a full house, and it was pandemonium."

THE FARRELLY BROTHERS

"As a screenwriter, early on I thought a lot about Cameron Crowe. The way Barry Levinson balanced drama and comedy affected me deeply. James L. Brooks' *Terms Of Endearment* is the bar you're always trying to get to. But then there were the people who were just crazy funny, when I was trying to figure out how to do that. With *Dumb And Dumber*, I went to previews with Jim Carrey and watched the Farrelly Brothers test that movie, and I remember seeing *There's Something About Mary* with Ben Stiller. We went on a Friday night in Santa Monica, on opening

THE STORY OF THE SHOT

How iconic
images came
to life

Casablanca

FOUND FOR POUND, there may be no more quotable film finale than that of *Casablanca*. "Here's looking at you, kid"; "If that plane leaves the ground and you're not with him, you'll regret it. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life"; "Round up the usual suspects"; "We'll always have Paris"; and "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship". Hit after hit after hit after hit.

Most of those lines of dialogue can be attributed to two of the film's credited writers, twin brothers Julius and Philip Epstein (the third credited writer, Howard Koch, worked separately from the pair). Needing an ending for Michael Curtiz's World War II movie (made, lest we forget, slap-bang in the middle of said war) that resolved the film's central love triangle between Humphrey Bogart's Rick Blaine, Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa Lund and Paul Henreid's resistance leader Victor Laszlo, but which also conformed to the Motion Picture Production Code — not a fan of extra-marital fornication — and painted Bogie in a heroic light, they went for a drive.

And, during that drive, they hit upon "round up the usual suspects" — a phrase that would, 50 years later, inspire Bryan Singer and Christopher McQuarrie to fashion an entire movie around it — and came up with a doozy of an ending. One in which Rick, turning selfishness into selfless sacrifice, bundles Ilsa, the love of his life, onto a plane with a husband she doesn't love, but who nevertheless needs her by his side for the fight ahead. Oh, and then he also kills

the local Nazi-in-chief, walking off into the foggy night with his new best pal, Claude Rains' French policeman, Renault.

The final line, though, didn't come from the Epsteins, but from producer Hal B. Wallis, who had shelled out \$20,000 (then a lot of money) for the rights to Murray Burnett and Joan Alison's unproduced play, *Everybody Comes To Rick's*. Four days after the film had wrapped, Wallis sent two options for the film's caper to the editor, Owen Marks. One was, "Louis, I might have known you'd mix your patriotism with a little larceny." The other was...well, you know; a staple of "Greatest Last Lines" lists, and one that was dubbed by Bogart a month into post.

As for the scene itself, it was shot, as was most of the film, on a Burbank soundstage, with copious amounts of fog from smoke machines covering up the fact that the Lockheed Model 12 Electra Junior airplane that is meant to spirit Ilsa and Victor away was actually a model, made out of cardboard, surrounded by little-person background artists, hired to give a greater impression of its scale. At one point, plans were mooted for a coda in which Rick and Renault found themselves on a boat, ahead of the Allied invasion of North Africa, but they were scrapped. Probably for the best — this deceptively simple, gloriously memorable, endlessly parodied (in everything from *The Simpsons* to *The Naked Gun*) scene remains one of cinema's great endings. Here's looking at it, kid. **CHRIS HEWITT**

CASABLANCA IS OUT NOW ON DVD.
REEL PLAY AND DIGITAL.

INSTANT TRIVIA



Everybody Comes To Rick's was eventually staged — in 1991, when it ran for six weeks at the Whitehall Theatre in London. Leslie Grantham, aka *EastEnders'* Dirty Den, played Rick.

2

Don Siegel, who would go on to direct *Dirty Harry*, oversaw some of the montages in the movie, shot by the second unit.

3

Casey Robinson was an uncredited writer on the project, and as a result didn't receive an Academy Award when the movie won Best Writing (Screenplay).

4

The highest-paid actor on the movie was not Bogart, nor Bergman, and not even Claude Rains. Instead, that honour went to Conrad Veidt, who picked up \$25,000 for playing Major Strasser.

Artist



They'll always
have Paris:
Humphrey
Bogart and
Ingrid Bergman
as star-crossed
lovers Rick
and Ilsa.

Steady Eddie

For two decades, **EDDIE MARSAN** has been one of the most dependable character actors around. Here are eight reasons why

"MY WHOLE SCHTICK," says Eddie Marsan, "is that people can't define me. I get offended when people try to define me. Nobody wants me to be me." Since his breakthrough in the early Noughties, the London-born Marsan has emerged as one of the finest character actors around, switching effortlessly between comedy, drama, TV, film, likeable supporting characters and loathsome slugs. Here, with recent projects *The Contractor* and *Choose Or Die* now available to stream, we ask him about some of his most memorable outings.

MUGGER #1

THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO LITTLE (1997)

There's an early scene in the fairly minor Bill Murray comedy in which Murray's character, a bumbling American in London who thinks he's playing an elaborate spy game, is held at knifepoint by two thugs, who become discomfuted by Murray's childish enthusiasm. One of them, in his first movie role, is Marsan, then in his late twenties. "I was so nervous, and he was so supportive," says Marsan. "Quite a lot of big Hollywood stars would go to their trailer and you'd have a stand-in read their lines when the camera's on you. But he gave me 110 per cent when the camera was on me. It was like having a private show by Bill Murray."

EDDIE MILLER

GANGSTER NO. 1 (2000)
Marsan had known Paul Bettany for years when the chance came to play alongside him in Paul McGuigan's hardbitten tale of a London mobster on the rise. "I remember thinking, 'If you can't be Gangster No. 1, don't be

Gangster No. 2: be The Coward.'" And so, in a memorable scene that still chills the blood, Marsan played a criminal who is reduced to a wreck by nothing more than Bettany's steely glare... and the threat of an axe on a kitchen table. "It was brilliant to do that scene with him, because it was just like being in a rehearsal studio. And that character introduced me to people as a reliable character actor."

SCOTT HAPPY-GO-LUCKY (2008)

Terry Donovan aside, the role of an increasingly irate driving instructor going round the bend thanks to an eternally perky Sally Hawkins is perhaps the one for which Marsan is recognised most. Mainly by driving instructors. "All the time," he

Below, top to bottom: Marsan's debut film, The Man Who Knew Too Little; Gangster No. 1; Being driven mad in Happy-Go-Lucky. Right, clockwise from main: The hapless Spyglass in Atomic Blonde; With Olivia Colman in Tyrannosaur; Terry in Ray Donovan; Opposite Simon Pegg in The World's End; The Contractor.



smiles. "All the time. And people tell me they use it to teach their kids how to use the rear-view mirror and the two side mirrors, all that stuff." It was his second time working with Mike Leigh, after a supporting role in *Vera Drake*, but this exposure to the Leigh Method was eye-opening. "I started creating this character and thought it was going to be a Travis Bickle kind," says Marsan. "And then Mike said, 'Go to this house and give this person a driving lesson.' I rang the doorbell and Sally opened the door with a 'Hello!' And I realised I'm in an Ealing comedy. That's what's brilliant about Mike."

JAMES, TYRANNOOSAUR (2011)

Marsan's is a character to chill the blood in Paddy Considine's debut as a director, playing the abusive husband of Olivia Colman's character. "It wasn't a difficult character to play because Olivia and I were given case studies of women who had been in domestic abuse," he says. "One of the overriding factors in all these cases was that the men abusing them wanted to be loved. So I had to play a character who wants to be loved, but thinks he has to abuse somebody to get it. That's what's

more frightening, in a sense. Paddy is a genius. It's a shocking film, but a beautiful film as well."

TERRY DONOVAN

RAY DONOVAN (2013-2020)

Marsan had been offered — and turned down — a few TV shows before *Ray Donovan*, and the part of Terry Donovan, the kind, Parkinson's-suffering brother of Liev Schreiber's enforcer, came his way. He wanted to turn that down too, but didn't for two reasons. One, "To convince people I was from Boston, and had Parkinson's, was a great challenge." Two, "I spoke to an American friend who said, 'You can't turn it down. You've got four kids. If you turn another one down, there won't be another.'" Six seasons and a TV movie later, it was the right call.

PETER PAGE

THE WORLD'S END (2013)

Of the five members of Gary King's troupe in Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's apocalyptic Cornetto comedy, Marsan was the only one who hadn't worked with Wright or Pegg before. Not that that mattered. "We had a laugh making that movie," he says. "The writing is very technical, like music almost,



like an Alan Ayckbourn play." Peter Page is a timid, gentle soul, which Marsan said tickled Pegg. "He said I played the weakest of the bunch, but I'm the one who's probably had more street fights!" Handy to know.

SPYGLASS ATOMIC BLONDE (2017)

Marsan engenders loyalty in directors. Guy Ritchie, Mike Leigh and David Leitch have all used him multiple times. Only, it always ends badly on Leitch's movies, even when he's not a villain. Take his nervous Nelly, *Spyglass*, in *Atomic Blonde*, bleeding out while Charlize Theron takes out a string of bad guys. "David is a genius," says Marsan. "It's like making a movie with the Bolshoi Ballet. He wants somebody who, in those moments, is authentic. He says, 'Can you do that, Eddie? Then I'll kill you at the end.'" Four Leitch films, four Leitch deaths so far. Maybe one day he'll break

the streak and be the action hero. "It's written in the American Constitution that all men are created equal," he laughs, "but I promise you, they're not."

VIRIL THE CONTRACTOR (2022)

"[Director] Tarik Saleh, who worked with me on *Ray Donovan*, pitched this to me," says Marsan of his cameo in this Chris Pine actioner, as someone who gives Pine refuge. "He said, 'There's this character I need. The film takes a breather, and I want the audience to take a breather with somebody who embodies humanity.'" It's a small role, but Marsan treats all parts the same. "You come in prepared," he says. "That's what my job is. They want someone to come in and they don't have to worry." Otherwise known as a Marsan. **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE CONTRACTOR IS OUT NOW ON
PRIME VIDEO. CINCOSIX ON DVD IS OUT
NOW ON NETFLIX

MARK KERMODE'S MOVIE PLAYLIST

THE CRITIC AND SCALA RADIO
PRESENTER CHOOSES SCORES
HE'S BEEN PLAYING ON HIS
WEEKLY SHOW



TRUE THINGS

BY ALEX BARANOWSKI

Alex Baranowski's score for Harry Woodliff's second feature, starring Ruth Wilson and Tom Burke, really gets under the skin of the drama, which the director called "a cautionary tale of a destructive sexual relationship that is both complex and ordinary". I played a few unfinished cues prior to the film's release on my Scala show, and the album is now available on all major platforms. Alex told me, "I loved Harry's debut film, *Only You* — her use of music was a brilliantly bold combination of score and needle drops that were hard to differentiate between, a boldness which was certainly an inspiration for *True Things*. We really wanted the score to tell Kate's [Wilson] story, as if it was the music playing in her head. It felt like the ensemble should be a small one, so I chose to use a string quartet, which was double tracked — recorded at the huge Empire recording studio in Hackney but with microphones placed very close. This gave us a raw, direct sound whilst still feeling the expanse of the big room." Also, check out the four-track EP of music from *Only You* by Emilie Levienais-Fiarrouc, who would go on to score *Piano* (Bailey-Bond's brilliant *Censor*).

RRR

BY M.M. KEERAVANI
Baahubali director S.S.

Rajamouli's latest, *RRR* has become a huge international hit. M.M. Keeravani's soundtrack has also become something of a staple on Scala, where we've played tracks ranging from "Dosti", with vocals by famed playback singer Udit Narayan, to "Komaram Bheemudo", strikingly performed by Kala Bhairava.

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

BY SON LUX

American experimental band Son Lux provide the thrillingly inventive soundtrack for Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's remarkable feature, with input from the likes of David Byrne. I've played tracks such as "This Is A Life — Extended" on Scala, but I'd advise *Empire* readers to check out the entire OST, which comprises a whopping 49 cues of head-spinning invention.

EASTER PARADE

BY VARIOUS

It's Judy Garland's centenary, so we've been celebrating by playing a selection of classic cuts, including tracks from this 1948 gem which was correctly billed as "The Happiest Musical Ever Made". From the title track to "A Fella With An Umbrella" and the floating "Snookey Cookeys" (not to mention Fred Astaire's "Drum Crazy"), it's all bangers, no clangers!



MARK KERMODE'S FILM MUSIC SHOW IN ASSOCIATION
WITH EMPIRE, IS ON SCALA RADIO ON SATURDAYS
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THE RANKING

One great movie star.
Four Empire writers.
Forty stories of sheer
adventure!

Bruce Willis movies

Chris: This Ranking is dedicated to the legendary Bruce Willis. Of course, it's in sad circumstances because he's suffering from aphasia, and has decided to retire from acting. But he leaves behind an incredible array of movies, some absolute belters. When did we first become acquainted with him?

James: My friend Squid had the soundtrack to *Moonlighting*, and I remember listening to the *Moonlighting* theme tune. I'm pretty sure that predated *Die Hard*.

Helen: I think I was too young to be allowed to watch *Moonlighting*. I didn't get to see *Die Hard* for a long time.

Nick: I had the Bruce Willis *Pulp Fiction* character poster on my wall at school. But I have a boring answer: it's *Die Hard*. It was on heavy rotation.

James: I saw *Die Hard 2* in the cinema on a trip to America with my mum. Afterwards, I had to explain, "Yippee-ki-yay, motherfucker" to my mum. I was about 13.

Chris: Did your mum like it? **James:** I don't recall. I remember liking it, but also feeling underwhelmed, which I think is how everyone felt when they saw *Die Harder*.

Helen: I don't mind *Die Harder*. It's quite good. **Nick:** This is one of the hardest top tens I've had to put together. He's got a lot of good stuff.

Chris: But there's an elephant in the room, which is that he made a lot of dumb. When he hit, though, he really hit. For me, he's one of the great movie stars of the last 50 years.

Helen: I think the movie star thing is very important. He's

not primarily an actor in that Oscar-y sense. He is a movie star. He has a certain base persona that he carries with him into all his best roles. He's not a transformative actor in the way of Meryl Streep.

Chris: He is transformative. He has hair in *Die Hard* 1, 2 and 3, and he does not have hair in *Die Hard* 4 and 5.

Helen: That is a stunning transformation. I take it back. But in contrast to Sly Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, his partners in Planet Hollywood and the other leading action men of the time, he was much more down-to-earth and realistic.

Chris: His career is fascinating. He hits with *Moonlighting*, in which he displays that smirking, wisecracking, glit persona, mixed with this scrappy, pugnacious quality.

OUR CRITICS



NICK DE SEMLYEN
Don't ask him where he hides his *Pulp Fiction* Blu-ray.



JAMES DYER
Attacks his job — ranking Bruce Willis movies — with a certain exuberance.



CHRIS HEWITT
Empire's sole defender of *Hudson Hawk*. The man knows, the man knows...



HELEN O'HARA
Has seen *The Fifth Element* so often she's got a Leeloos Dallas Multipass.



Helene: He's a bit of rough.

Chris: And Hollywood liked the cut of his jib. He makes two Blake Edwards comedies, *Sunset* and *Blind Date*, which are fine, but neither set the box office alight. And then, incredibly, *Die Hard* is the next thing he does, and he gets a record fee.

Nick: \$5 million, which changed the industry. Every star had turned the role down. And [director] John McTiernan wasn't totally confident about Bruce.

James: Everyone passed on this script for what is arguably the greatest action movie ever made. But it wasn't until you added Bruce Willis that it became the *Die Hard* that we know and love.

Nick: He's not afraid to play a wreck of a human being. He leans even more into that in the

third one. He's so hungover and unshaven and just a complete mess. *The Last Boy Scout* does that to an extreme as well, which I love. He's such a fuck-up.

Helene: That's a deeply cynical, mean film a lot of the time, but the fact he is an absolute disaster zone in it is something a lot of stars would have said no to.

Chris: I love *The Last Boy Scout*. For me, it has the coolest moment of Willis' entire career, which is, "Touch me again and I'll kill ya."

Helene: He has a kind of Bogart quality to me. That slightly hanging kind of action hero. **Nick:** He also had an adventurous quality, which I think explains why he had huge hits and huge misses. For a long time he tried to challenge himself and do something different, which makes for an interesting filmography.

James: if you look at *12 Monkeys*, *The Fifth Element*, and even *Unbreakable*, these are unconventional movies. And some are actually batshit as well. I liked the fact that he didn't play it safe.

Helene: I love *The Fifth Element*. **Nick:** That and *12 Monkeys*, aside from the fact that they're both numerical in title, couldn't be more different. One of them is grim and dour, the other is like the Fruit Pastilles of sci-fi films, sugary and brightly coloured. I love it. Well, I have issues with elements of it.

James: Five of them?

Nick: Three of the five elements. **James:** *12 Monkeys* is a very good film. It's just so weird. He's quite understated and a little bit introverted and insular.

Chris: There's a possibility *12 Monkeys* has the best Bruce Willis performance. When he listens to "Blueberry Hill" on the radio with such vulnerability, I don't understand how he didn't get Oscar-nominated. He could also have been nominated for *The Sixth Sense*.

James: *Unbreakable* is a better film, better performance, better everything.

Helene: He's so dialled back in *Unbreakable*.

James: He's almost asleep.

Helene: It's a deliberate choice, but a very good one, and it gets

across the idea of this quiet, introverted guy who has never really questioned any of this stuff about himself. It's exactly the kind of thing Oscar overlooks over and over again.

Nick: I appreciate I'm in the minority, but I find those films quite chilly and vacuum-sealed.

James: *The Sixth Sense* is overrated. It's got a very clever twist, and I think people were sold by that twist. I don't think it's the masterpiece people make it out to be. Whereas *Unbreakable* is a low-key masterpiece. It completely subverts the genre.

Chris: I would say he's made two masterpieces.

Helene: *The Fifth Element* and *Ocean's 12*.

Chris: *Die Hard* and *Pulp Fiction* are the two. Are you gonna throw another in there?

James: I love *Unbreakable*, but it's not an undisputed masterpiece because Nick is disputing it.

Nick: Do we want to talk about why he's great in *Pulp Fiction*?

Chris: Why is he great in *Pulp Fiction*?

Nick: Because he said, "Zed's dead, baby. Zed's dead." That was on the poster on my wall, and it was fucking cool.

Chris: Here's the thing about *Pulp Fiction*. It's very self-consciously cool, but it is an undeniably cool film. And he's the coolest thing in it. That moment in the bar when he and John Travolta bump into each other and they have that little movie-star stand-off is great. Not a word is said, not a punch is thrown, but it's great.

Nick: He's presented as the toughest character in the whole movie and then he's thrown into the gimpy scene, which is the standout Bruce Willis moment for me. You really are scared for Bruce Willis, who's the guy who's always one step ahead of whatever trouble he's in.

James: It's an absolute masterpiece.

Helene: I don't love it. I love some of the others, like *The Fifth Element*. But I admire it, I will give it that.

Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

THE TOP TEN



DIE HARD (1988)

Chris: "John McTiernan's classic thriller reinvented the action hero with Willis' vulnerable yet bold John McClane. Willis goes toe-to-toe with one of film's great villains, Alan Rickman's Hans Gruber, and holds his own."



PULP FICTION (1994)

Nick: "Zed may be dead, but this brought Willis' career back to life. His gimpy-slaying boxer is iconic."



UNBREAKABLE (2000)

James: "Forget that ghost stuff, this is peak Shyamalan — an inspired subversion of the superhero genre."



THE SIXTH SENSE (1999)

Chris: "Not a horror, but a moving tale of a broken man mending himself. One of Willis' most restrained turns."



12 MONKEYS (1996)

Helene: "Willis' dialled-back charisma and wonder at the lost world of the present grounds the sci-fi madness."



DIE HARD WITH A VENGEANCE (1995)

Nick: "Intense, funny, and yes, has a bit where Bruce surfs a truck."



THE FIFTH ELEMENT (1997)

Helene: "Willis stands out amid the gonzo excess, somehow selling the love story in-between shoot-outs."



THE LAST BOY SCOUT (1991)

James: "Shane Black's wise-cracking script and Tony Scott's oil-slick direction make this a riotous watch."



LOOPER (2015)

Helene: "Playing antagonist to Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Willis undercuts his image as an unstoppable hardman."



ARMAGEDDON (1998)

James: "Dafter than a badger sandwich, this is the most straight-up enjoyable Willis movie of them all."



!
SPOILER
WARNING

THE VIEWING GUIDE

A deep dive into the
must-see moments from
the month's big release

The Worst Person In The World

JOACHIM TRIER'S MODERN romance — which has found fans in everyone from Paul Thomas Anderson to Jamie Lee Curtis — is a nuanced and tender story about a young woman falling in and out of love in her native Oslo. Here, Trier walks us through the key moments from his Oscar-nominated film, which features a startlingly brilliant breakout performance from Renate Reineve.

THE BLACK DRESS

The film opens with Reineve's glammed-up Julie smoking on a balcony, with a sundrenched Oslo



cityscape behind her. Trier recalls working out the shot with his cinematographer, Kasper Tuxen. "I explained how the shot was all about Julie confronting the city, and how she was looking down on life as if she were in a different dimension," he says. The frame belongs to a sequence later in the film, in which Julie attends the book launch of her partner Aksel (Anders Danielsen Lie). During the edit, however, Trier decided this was his opening shot. "It presents what the film is about. Julie is all dressed up, she should be happy. But something is not quite as it should be."

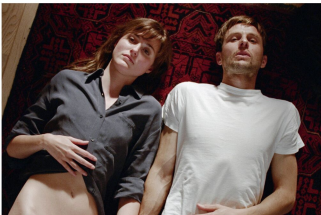
AN UNCOMFORTABLE DINNER

During a trip to Aksel's parents' house, Julie is interrogated by his wider family about her status as an unmarried, childless woman. "She feels patronised, even if that's not their intention," explains Trier. "It's satirical, that awkwardness that happens when people try to be understanding, but they're actually being quite arrogant." Julie's response? To get drunk and speak her mind. "She channels this

anarchistic bluntness that they're missing from their bourgeois lives. But she's nervous at the same time," he says. Trier also tried to shoot inwards when it came to the scene: "I've been that guy at the end of the table, where I think I'm doing everyone a favour by explaining a concept and then realise halfway through, 'Jesus, they all know what I'm talking about. I'm a jerk.'"

THE WEDDING CRASHER

After stealing away from Aksel's book launch, Julie wanders into a nearby wedding party, where she meets Ervind (Herbert Nordrum). Unwilling to cheat on their partners, the pair engage in an intimate testing of boundaries, including long, lustful stares and amplit sniffing. "Herbert and Renate went to drama school together, so they had this trusting friendship that they could build on," says Trier. The filmmaker had planned out copious rehearsals with the pair for the scene, but quickly threw out that approach, deciding that the raw energy of performing on camera suited



the spontaneity of both characters' impulses. One moment from the scene didn't make the cut, however: "They're standing by the window, and they're supposed to show each other their ugliest faces," recalls Trier. "But then they ad-libbed the part where they smelled each other's armpits, and so that's what I kept. It just felt more alive and fun."

FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

On her 30th birthday, Julie's lineage is explored via photos of the generations of women in her family. A narrator explains the status of each woman at the age of 30, right up to her great-great-great-grandmother. "While we were researching we realised that a Norwegian woman's life-expectancy in the 1750s was 35, so many died in childbirth," says Trier, who used these women's stories to highlight the quality of life enjoyed today. "Julie's at this stage of her life where she thinks that she can do anything, but there are limits. Life can be shorter than you think."

THE BAD TRIP

After shacking up with Eivind, Julie takes mushrooms at a gathering, and embarks on a nightmarish trip involving ageing body parts and breastfeeding in front of her family and past and present lovers as part of a public art performance. The singular scene's surrealist tone allowed Trier to externalise Julie's anxiety about her relationships and growing old. "I like Gilbert Shelton comics like *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, and Cheech & Chong," says Trier when describing his influences for the sequence. "I thought that it was fun to play around with a bit of psychedelic imagination. There's a little bit of Fellini's *8½* thrown in there as well."

THE CRUSHING CONFESSION

Julie starts a friendship with Aksel after he's diagnosed with terminal cancer. After initially putting on a brave face, he opens up, and delivers a heart-breaking monologue about wanting to see out his days in his old flat with Julie. It's a significant shift in the film's tone, which had largely pivoted on the messiness of new love

up until this point. "We called this the Scenes From A Marriage part of the film," chuckles Trier. "The politics of reengagement are gone, and what's left is complete honesty. It's unsexy, but the quintessential part of love is compassion."

THE BITTERSWEET SUNRISE

Instead of spending Aksel's final night in his company, Julie chooses to walk alone through an empty Oslo. As she watches the sunrise, she knows in her heart that Aksel has died. "Until this point, Julie has always lived through someone else's gaze," Trier explains. "By walking alone through the city, she's finally able to deal with being by herself." He says that the key to Julie's newfound contentment is accepting life's flaws. "She's not so worried about being grounded in herself," he concludes. "Maybe everything isn't perfect. Maybe her life hasn't reached its utmost potential. But it's a good life. And you know what? That's good enough." **BETH WEBB**

THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD IS OUT NOW ON DVD, AND ON 25 JUNE ON DVD AND BLU-RAY

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THE CULT OF KIM NEWMAN

The critic and novelist
this month's weirdest
straight-to-video pic

THIS MONTH'S THEME is Irish horror. And it's not all Warwick Davis cackling about his pot o' gold. Kate Dolan's *You Are Not My Mother* is an outstanding mix of North-Dublin-housing-estate social realism and faerie legend. Teenager Char (Hazel Doupe), tight-lipped or seething with pain, worries that her bipolar mother Angela (Carolyn Bracken) has been replaced by a vindictive look-alike out to punish her family for a past transgression. Char also has trouble with a local girl gang who are collecting scraps for a Halloween bonfire that's sure to feature in a last-act ritual. Like several recent horror movies (*The Babadook*, *Relic*, *Antlers*), the underlying subject is living with a relative who's struggling with mental illness, but this doesn't neglect the supernatural horrors. Doupe and Bracken are awards-quality brilliant.

Lynne Davison's Northern Irish dark drama *Mandrake* gets out into the overcast countryside. Probation officer Cathy (Deirdre Mullins) takes on the case of witchy murderer 'Bloody Mary' Laidlaw (Dorothy Crotty), and social issues are displaced by folk horror as new corpses turn up in the woods and unresolved elements of the original crimes resurface, binding the women together. Splendidly acted, with Crotty chilling as a malevolent and possibly magical presence, this treads a well-worn path into dark forests but conceals nasty traps in the wild undergrowth. It has shock moments, but it's the atmosphere of damp, earthy dread that'll stick with you.

If Dolan and Davison deliver subtle, powerful chills, then Cosmo McMahon's *Let The*



Wrong One In represents another strain of Irish tall tale — wild, knockabout gore farce. Deco (Eoin Duffy), a Dublin waster in an ugly jacket, is bitten by a vampire party girl — just back from her hen night in Transylvania — and convinces his long-suffering younger brother Matt (Karl Rice) to invite him into the family home from which he has been barred. The brothers try to cope with Deco's new condition, not helped by inept vampire-hunter Henry (Anthony Head) and a gaggle of fanged women. McMahon throws in sloppy physical effects and broadly silly bat transformations on the

principle that if one jokes falls flat, then another two or three will eventually bludgeon a laugh out of you. Extra points for terrifying, hallucinogenic use of Dana's Eurovision earsworm 'All Kinds Of Everything'.

Mark Sheridan's found-footage romcom/horror *Crone Wood* has Danny (Ed Murphy) and Hailey (Elva Trill) documenting their first date, which extends from a chat in a pub to an impulsive camping trip in now-familiar forests. Watching all these movies, you could be forgiven for thinking no-one can set foot outside the house in Ireland or its northern neighbour without being lured into a sinister ritual — probably involving animal masks and bonfires — to placate the faerie folk or serve the ends of a pagan cult. *Crone Wood* goes that route, but the main couple are more fun than usual and it winds up with a slightly fresh take on the sacrifice.

Tharun Mohan's *The Darkness* (formerly *Dorcha*) has Lisa (Amelia Eve, getting a real acting workout) possessed by 19th-century lass Níav (Katherine Harthorne) and another complicated backstory involving changelings and magic summonings. Set in Ireland, it was in fact mostly filmed in England.

Note without comment — in all of these films, the source of supernatural evil is a woman... and their primary victims are fearless men who more-or-less deserve all torments inflicted on them.



CULT HERO OF THE MONTH BRENDAN MULDOWNEY

Irish writer-director Brendan Muldowney's latest, *The Celler*, is a feature-length revision of his creepy 2004 short *The Ten Steps*, about a girl talked into going into the basement in a house where the Devil once appeared. With Elisha Cuthbert as a mother who'll literally go to Hell (or equivalent metaphysical limbo) to get her daughter back, it's an excellent haunted-house movie. All Muldowney's feature films are worth a look: *Savage* (2009) is about a wimpy liberal Dubliner (Darren Healy) who is castrated by thugs, and his subsequent transformation into a vigilante hardman; *Love Eternal* (2013) is a necrophilia-themed romance with curious shut-in Ian (Robert de Hoog) drawn to perhaps-suicidal grieving mother Naomi (Polyanna McIntosh); and *Pigimage* (2017) is a story (Tom Holland, Jon Bernthal, Richard Armitage) mud-and-gore medieval road movie with monks and knights clashing over a holy relic.

6 OF THE BEST

Team *Empire* on the month's essential movies

PICK OF THE MONTH



X

OUT 26 JUNE / CERT 16 / 105 MINS

R18

Sex! Murder! '70s cinema! All of Ti West's stylistic signatures, developed over a decade of filmmaking, come to fruition in *X*. An intentionally old-school, throwback slasher, it follows a group of amateur pornographers who rock up at an elderly couple's ranch to shoot a sex-flick — amusingly, director RJ O'Jen Campbell imagines it as an art movie — before being butchered one-by-one. But the stab-a-thon formula is subverted in surprising ways — most significantly with an underpinning of melancholy, as the perpetrator's motivations are revealed. Mia Goth is excellent in a challenging role, West does slow-burn scares brilliantly, and the finale features the year's most unforgettable sex scene. Rated X for X-cellent. **BEN TRAVIS**



AMBULANCE

OUT 27 JUNE / CERT 15 / 136 MINS

R18

Dialling the Bayhem up to 999 for 911, more accurately, Michael Bay's best movie in absolute yonks sees brothers Jake Gyllenhaal and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II botch a heist, then embark upon a getaway in a stolen ambulance, with a paramedic and wounded cop on board. That would seem to be enough for a tight little 90-minute thriller, but with some nice reversals and ingenious rug-pulls, and unexpectedly layered character work from the two stars and Eliza Gonzalez as the paramedic, *Ambulance* only threatens to run out of fuel towards the end. And when it comes to the action, the old dog has learned some new tricks, throwing drones into the fray as he blows up everything he can get his hands on. Glorious stuff. **CHRIS HEWITT**



THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD

OUT 26 JUNE / CERT 15 / 128 MINS

R18

You never really stop coming of age, as is wonderfully explored in Joachim Trier's funny, reliable, romantic *The Worst Person in the World*. Following Renate Reinsve's Julie as she roams through life and Oslo, juggling following her heart with making bad decisions, *Worst Person* manages to chronicle late twenty-something malaise with refreshing authenticity throughout its 12 chapters, thanks to its impeccable, Oscar-nominated screenplay and mesmerising, honest performances. Its quiet, gut-punch moments are perfectly balanced with naturalistic wit, and the fantastical sequences (a city frozen in time; a psychedelic trip interspersed with animation) elevate it further. One of 2022's unmissable movies. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**



THE BATMAN

OUT 13 JUNE / CERT 15 / 176 MINS

R18

How do you make the third big-screen *Batman* in the last decade feel different enough from what's come before? Step 1: Hire Matt Reeves. Step 2: Cast Robert Pattinson. In their hands, this rawer, grittier iteration of Gotham's Caped Crusader is still figuring out if his vigilante is more effective as a boogeyman or an inspiration. It's a potent arc that's aided by a smart antagonist in The Riddler (a chilling Paul Dano), as well as Zoë Kravitz's cunning Selina Kyle and Jeffrey Wright's steely not-yet-Commissioner Gordon. Throw in some gorgeous cinematography from Greig Fraser and a simple yet powerful theme by Michael Giacchino, and you have an excellent foundation for multiple *Bat*-sequels to build on. **AMON WARMANN**



DRIVE MY CAR

OUT 4 JULY / CERT 15 / 179 MINS

R18

A three-hour meditation on grief and creativity, adapted from a Murakami short story into an introspective, Oscar-nominated drama, *Drive My Car* shouldn't really work, being too quiet and too long to fully grip the viewer's attention for over three hours. Yet its wisdom and calm demands you appreciate all the things you have in your life. It's anchored by a steely performance by Hidetoshi Nishijima as widower and theatre director Yusaku, and Toko Mura as Misaki, a young woman hired to — stay with us — drive his car. The pair quietly bond over regret and loss, their relationship uncertain as writer-director Ryusuke Hamaguchi lets us read between the lines and recognise our own stories. A contemplative wonder. **ELLA KEMP**



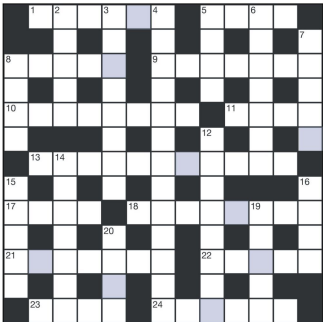
SHAFT

OUT 27 JUNE / CERT TBC / 100 MINS

R18

"Who's the black private dick that's a sex machine to all the chicks?" asks Isaac Hayes in the Oscar-winning theme song; the answer is John Shaft (Richard Roundtree), a dude with a generously cut brown leather jacket and Burl Reynolds moustache seen wandering around New York under the jazzy opening credits. Patient Zero of the 'Blaxploitation' genre, *Shaft* is a makeover for the Mike Hammer-style two-listed private-detective movie — with a plot about the Mafia muscling in on Harlem racketeers, and a '70s touch as the hero calls in a Black radical group to wage war on the Mob. The film features grimy locations, then-unfamiliar slang and fashions and that million-selling soul score. As the man himself says, "Can you dig it?" **KIM NEWMAN**

CROSSWORD AND COMPETITION



ACROSS

- 1 Cell sign of US Navy pilot Tom Kazanskiy (5)
- 5 John Candy was this babysitting uncle (4)
- 8 — Atlas (Tom Hanks movie) (5)
- 9 Jodie Foster film based on a Carl Sagan novel (7)
- 10 It turned upside-down in a 1972 disaster flick (8)
- 11 Parker, who made Buggy Malone, Angel Heart and 23 Across (4)
- 13 Italian film icon who was Cary Grant's Houseboat companion (5,5)
- 17 Ice planet where tauntauns live (4)
- 18 Damien Chazelle's second feature film as director (6)
- 21 Jon, who plays Happy Hogan in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (7)
- 22 Danny Torrance's nickname is 'Doctor —' (5)
- 23 Film set at the New York High School Of Performing Arts (4)
- 24 Zero Dark — (Jessica Chastain film) (6)

DOWN

- 2 Alex in *Kiss The Girls or Aaron in The Bourne Legacy* (5)
- 3 It comes before Cowboy, Run and Special in film titles (8)
- 4 He went from *About A Boy* to *Fury Road* (5,5)
- 5 Samantha, who was Pierce Brosnan's Money Penny (4)
- 6 Chaplin, aka the Tramp (7)
- 7 It links 1984's *Dune*, 1978's *The Swarm* and Newman & Redford (5)
- 8 Could be Scorsese's *Fear* or Batman's gear (4)
- 12 He's been Joey LaMotta and Tommy DeVito (3,5)
- 14 Spencer, from *Hidden Figures* and *The Help* (7)
- 15 "Who's the cat that won't cop out when there's danger all about?" (5)
- 16 *The Black Pearl*, *Surprise* or 10 Across (4)
- 19 K is one in *Men in Black* (5)
- 20 Richard, star of *American Gigolo* (4)

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SUMMER ISSUE ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Teen, 3 Rio Bravo, 8 Smithers, 9 Lotte, 11 Away We Go, 13 Brad, 15 Sunday, 16 Police, 18 Alec, 19 Guinness, 22 Keanu, 23 O'Connor, 25 Valkyrie, 26 Andy. **DOWN:** 1 Tessa, 2 Eli, 4 Ice Age, 5 Bela, 6 Afterlife, 7 Showman, 10 Eddie, 12 Annie Hall, 14 Johnson, 15 Shark, 20 Sorry, 21 Fury, 24 Nun. **ANAGRAM RYAN GOSLING**

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CLASSIC SCENE

Standout sequences from the great movies



Waiting For Guffman

Chosen by **ELIZABETH OLSEN**

ELIZABETH OLSEN: "I'm working at lots of locations in Texas right now, and one of them is where they shot *Waiting For Guffman*. There's this iconic staircase that leads to [theatre director] Corky St. Clair's apartment, and all the players of the theatre run over to try and get Corky to come out of his home. There's a moment where Catherine O'Hara says, 'Corky, we love you', and I find that to be a great moment in cinema."

INT. REHEARSAL SPACE — DAY

Lloyd Miller (Bob Balaban) is trying to address the cast of the upcoming production "Red, White And Blaine", including Ron Albertson (Fred Willard), Sheila Albertson (Catherine O'Hara), Libby Mae Brown (Parker Posey) and Dr. Allan Pearl (Eugene Levy). He stands on a step in an attempt to corral them.

LLOYD: I have an announcement. You've gotta listen up here.

Ron raises his hand, and talks over Lloyd.

RON: Excuse me. Are we

gonna be vocalising?

LLOYD: Listen up... we will be vocalising.

RON: Before we start, I'd like to clear my throat.

LLOYD: Good.

Suddenly Ron makes a loud farting noise, and laughs. He produces a whoopee cushion from behind his clipboard. Libby Mae laughs and claps him on the shoulder.

LLOYD: Yes, we'll be vocalising. We'll be doing a lot of... excuse me, please! Everybody, let's be serious now, just for a moment. And let's all listen up, okay? Corky has left the show and I am taking over.

As we see the shocked faces of the actors, Lloyd continues.

LLOYD: What I want to do today is start with some music, do dancing and work on our lines, and my hope is that at the end of the five days—

LIBBY MAE: What do you mean?

LLOYD: We'll know what we're doing and we will have a show.

SHEILA: Corky's left?

RON: You mean he's left for today or permanently?

LLOYD: Corky's quit the show, and it's my show.

EXT. STREET — DAY

The actors have not taken this well. We cut to them arriving at Corky's house. As Ron slams his car door shut, Libby Mae sprints off towards Corky's front door.

LIBBY MAE: Corky!

DR PEARL: Corky!

LIBBY MAE: Corky?

They walk up the steps to Corky's home. It's a lot of steps.

SHEILA: [to Ron] Here, you go up.

RON: Boy, do that twice a day, that's good exercise.

LIBBY MAE: Corky?

RON: You know, most athletic injuries— is he not answering?

SHEILA: [shouting] Corky, we love you!

RON: [banging on the door] Corky, open up!

Dr Pearl and Libby Mae say Corky's name again.

SHEILA: Corky, we love you! We want you to live!

RON: There may be something wrong. Try the door.

SHEILA: Oh God, it's us. It's our fa—

INT. CORKY'S HOUSE — DAY

We cut to a close-up of a radio, framed by bubbles. Then we pull back to see Corky (Christopher Guest) listening to a song while in the bath, looking utterly miserable.

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